

## *Introduction*

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Scanning the long shelf of my bookcase packed with copies of all of Muriel Spark's books, then turning to my files of research materials on her work, I think back, remembering how it all began. First, while in graduate school writing a dissertation about Anglo-Saxon poetry, I sought some diversion by reading novels by a number of contemporary British women writers—Bainbridge, Brookner, Carter, Figs, Fitzgerald, and Lively impressed me, but none as much as Muriel Spark, with her sly wit, absolute control of plot and often outrageous characters, inimitable voice, and meditation on great themes. In a professional literary career that extended from the late 1940s until her death, Dame Muriel wrote poems, stories, plays, novels, and essays that have given immense and varied pleasure. A glance at the extensive bibliography of her works reveals the astonishing output of a powerful and sustained creative spirit pitched at a high note until the end.

Riffling through my Spark volumes, I am almost certain that *Not to Disturb* (1971), that audaciously divine fable of plots and plot-makers, with time past, present, and future collapsed into an eternal now and presided over by a Prospero-like butler, introduced me to

the fictional world of Muriel Spark. Without agenda or system, I made my way through what had already been published (*The Comforters* [1957] through *Loitering with Intent* [1981]). When *The Only Problem* appeared (1984), its preoccupation with the problem of suffering and the Book of Job, a focus of my graduate work in religion, prompted me to write what would be my first published article. When *A Far Cry from Kensington* came along (1988), I reviewed it for *Commonweal*; shortly afterward, the literary editor, Rev. David Toolan S.J., commissioned a long essay for a series on Catholic writers: “Muriel Spark: Writing with Intent” (1989) was the result. Thereafter I read each new book and occasionally included one or two in my teaching.

Little did I know that Muriel Spark read what I had written. Penelope Jardine, her extraordinary secretary, saw to it that every word published about Spark’s work came to her attention and became part of an extensive file of clippings. I do not know who wrote first. I expect I did, likely in connection with the essay for *Commonweal*; but a frequent correspondence ensued, first by air mail letter, then by fax, and continued until just several weeks before her death on April 13, 2006. In her correspondence she was very much the writer of her fiction—precise, economical, and witty.

The first of several visits took place in March 1999 in connection with an interview commissioned by the *Paris Review* for its famous series, “Writers at Work.” Miss Jardine met me at the Arezzo train station, south of Florence, and whisked me off into the Tuscan hills to her palatial (twenty-four-room) converted rectory that the two women shared. I was ushered into one of the house’s sitting rooms to wait. Dame Muriel promptly appeared: elegantly coiffed, wearing a designer suit with silk scarf and stunning jewels, she made her way into the room aided by two walking sticks. We exchanged greetings and she sat down opposite me on a large, soft settee. I shall never forget her first words to me; with her eyes twinkling, a slightly flirtatious smile on her face, and in a musical voice that retained traces of Morningside, she said, “I want to thank you for your devotion to my work.” Who could resist such charm? I could well believe the stories about her dazzling social life in New York in the mid-1960s and later in Rome. The parties she gave at her flat in the Palazzo Taverna, which happened to have a drawing room the size of a cricket pitch, or at another home,

which she liked to tell guests had once been a house of ill repute, were legendary, with artists, film directors, writers, countesses, and cardinals from the Curia gliding in and out.

We did our work that snowy March day and had a lovely tea as well. Subsequent visits revealed a woman of great warmth, sophistication, and grace, always ready to talk about books, current events, religious controversies—really anything, since everything interested her. My first trip to Italy after Muriel’s death was utterly strange. Penelope met me, as usual; before stopping at their house, we visited the grave site, a moving experience. The graveyard rests on the hill on the way “home” and looks out over the Tuscan hills with a view toward Assisi. Muriel’s tomb is as precisely constructed and economically rendered as her fiction, a single verse from one of her poems the only words inscribed (“Nessun foglio si repete, ripettiamo solo la parola,” “Not a leaf / Repeats itself, we only repeat the word”) other than her name, dates, and the simple designation of “Poet” to mark her place among the Italian people she loved. They had returned that love earlier, making her an honorary citizen of the small village. And she had thanked them, in a way, by choosing to be buried among them on that wind-swept hill surrounded by olive trees.

This collection of essays was conceived as a way of partially repaying a great debt all readers have to this extraordinary writer, once described by David Lodge as “the most gifted and innovative British writer of her generation.” I had hoped that she would live to see it completed so that I might have the pleasure of pressing the volume into her own hands; but such was not to be, though she did know that it was in preparation. Somehow, the woman who believed so deeply in what she called “another world than this” will see it. In some measure, it also represents partial repayment of my own debt, both personal and professional, to Muriel Spark.

I was gratified when my invitations to potential contributors met with enthusiastic, positive response. Fourteen distinguished contributors have joined me in this endeavor, each one of them generous, enthusiastic, and patient. I have chosen a simple arrangement for their contributions, dividing them into two sections: “The Work” and “The Life.” Within “The Work” there are two principles of organization: the section begins with a broad intellectual and cultural focus, setting

Spark's work within the larger European traditions of thought and letters. The succeeding essays sharpen the focus and are chronologically ordered according to her publications, beginning with an essay on her poetry and ending with essays on her last two novels. Within "The Life" pieces follow a roughly chronological pattern for Spark's life, beginning with an essay about her early life and ending with one about her afterlife.

In "The Large Testimony of Muriel Spark," Gabriel Josipovici considers a half dozen of Spark's novels and sets her achievement within a rigorously intellectual and literary context (Kierkegaard, Becket, Proust, Sartre, Golding). Josipovici pays special attention to *Memento Mori* (1959), which, in its end-game grounding, serves him as a template for all of Spark's fiction. Each area of discussion moves gracefully and persuasively toward making a larger point as Josipovici argues that "she couches in Christian terms what is essentially a modernist enterprise." Spark emerges as a novelist of singular creativity and distinction.

Harold Pinter's lecture on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize in 2005 prompted Joseph Hynes's reflection, "Muriel Spark's Fiction: A Context." Pinter's address, titled "Art, Truth and Politics," received a great deal of attention for the playwright's condemnation of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq (and elsewhere), but Hynes concerns himself with Pinter's philosophical statements about truth. After a quick summary of Western philosophical thought and its impact on literature, Hynes focuses attention on the work of Beckett, Sartre, and Robbe-Grillet and what he sees as their role in demolishing modernism and constructing postmodernisms. Against them stands Spark, a writer more "in tune with ancient Greece and the Christian Middle Ages," who rejected postmodernist notions of incertitude, relativism, and meaning and expanded the possibilities of fiction.

My own essay, "'A Spirit of Vast Endurance': Muriel Spark, Poet and Novelist," chronicles Muriel Spark's career as poet, beginning at age nine and continuing well into her ninth decade. Though Spark is certainly less well known as a poet and her four books of poetry are indeed outnumbered by her twenty-two novels (and other works), she still regarded herself as a poet and considered her novels to be poems.

At first, this may seem contradictory; but some explanation may lie in the writings of Cardinal Newman, the single greatest influence on Spark's life and thought. Years ago Dame Muriel declared, "it was by way of Newman that I turned Roman Catholic." My argument is that it was also by way of Newman that she turned poet-novelist.

With special concern for a number of the short stories, Regina Barreca ("Breaking Free of the Grave: Muriel Spark's Uses of Humor and the Supernatural") locates Spark's distinctive, even unique, storytelling in her "juxtaposition of the postmodern with the post-mortem," which infuses everything with potent humor. Professor Barreca's keen understanding of the dynamics of storytelling, and of joke-telling in particular, enables her to illuminate Spark's fiction in a fresh way. And her discussion of the ways in which Spark drew upon "Gothic traditions and these pre-Enlightenment beliefs to create an alchemy of her own" contextualizes the work while extending its significance. "Breaking Free of the Grave" appropriately liberates Spark and her fiction from the narrow confines of any ideology and elucidates the mesmerizing pleasures of one writer's timeless achievement.

In "'Fully to Savour Her Position': Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity," Gerard Carruthers affirms with scholarly depth and precision what Spark herself has asserted time and again: rejecting labels such as "English novelist" and "Catholic novelist," she was, she said, if anything, "a Scottish writer." In underscoring Spark's essential Scottish identity, Carruthers makes skillful and convincing use of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), showing its formative impact on her fiction. Carruthers supports his contentions by directing attention to two infrequently discussed stories, "The Gentile Jewesses" and "The Black Madonna," as well as *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). In the end, Carruthers's high praise for Muriel Spark—he calls her "Scotland's most successful writer of the previous one hundred years"—rings true.

Frank Kermode was a long-time Spark partisan; indeed, so fervid was his devotion that Spark once called him "my apologist." Like John Updike, he rarely missed a chance to write about Spark, and one of his last essays, "Unrivaled Deftness: The Novels of Muriel Spark,"

gives an authoritative overview of four novels: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), *The Driver's Seat* (1970), and *The Only Problem* (1984). Kermode was always sensitive to the spiritual dimensions of Spark's novels but never at the cost of attention to her sharp satire, what he termed "her intelligent and unflinching contempt for stupidity and weakness." His long and deep study of Muriel Spark's writing gives us what is very likely the single most sustained and astute critical insight into her work. His particular focus on matters of creativity and construction yields a brilliant and illuminating analogy as he asserts, "One has the impression that for Spark there somehow exists, in advance of composition, a novel, or more usually a novella, which can be scanned as it were in a satellite's view of it, from above—a map, rather a temporal sequence." For Kermode, as for Anita Brookner, "a novel is a moral puzzle," and his essay conveys a palpable sense of delight in trying to solve the moral puzzles of Dame Muriel's fiction.

In "The Lightness of Muriel Spark's Novels," Dan Gunn directs attention to two of Spark's novels not often written about: *Not to Disturb* (1971) and *Territorial Rights* (1979). Prompted by a moment from a public interview he conducted with Dame Muriel at the American University of Paris in 2005, Gunn illuminates what he calls the "lightness" of Spark's fiction, drawing subtly and suggestively on the work of Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Calvino, and Kundera. His careful attention to verbal texture and linguistic elements (pun, ellipsis, interruption, repetition) allows us not only to appreciate Spark's paradoxical lightness but to participate in its inimitable pleasures. Certainly, Gunn's locating these novels within the context of Spark's work and within the larger context of European letters is a long-overdue debt now paid.

Taking as his starting point the creative overlap of Iris Murdoch's *A Word Child* (1975) and Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), both of which make use of J. M. Barrie's iconic figure of Peter Pan, John Glavin explores the nature and consequences of two great post-World War II writers' use of what Murdoch called a "wonderful dramatic myth." Differences between their deployment of the myth serve to isolate and illuminate Spark's extraordinary achievement. Glavin describes Spark as "exploring a virtual dynamic that coun-

ters and contests a hegemony of the actual.” Enriched and amplified by drawing upon the work of Henri Bergson and Anne Friedberg, “Muriel Spark and the Peters Pan” constructs Spark as a master of invention and reinvention, in both art and life.

David Malcolm’s “Elliptical and Inconsequential Ladies: Muriel Spark, Jane Bowles, Penelope Fitzgerald, and the *texte contestant*” constructs a dual argument. The first sets Spark’s work within what he calls “an honorable tradition of European letters that is as old as Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Austen, and Balzac.” The second associates her, by way of ellipsis and inconsequentiality, with two apparently disparate writers, Jane Bowles and Penelope Fitzgerald. Malcolm pays particular attention to three of Spark’s novels—*Territorial Rights* (1979), *The Only Problem* (1984), and *A Far Cry From Kensington* (1988). His use of theory (Bal, Kristeva, Sturges, and the lesser-known Esudie and Sandauer) enriches and supports the argument without ever deflecting attention away from Spark’s work. In the end, Malcolm sees Spark as “not quite the hippogriff many critics make her out to be.”

John Updike long championed Muriel Spark’s fiction; indeed, he was one of the first American critics to praise her work, beginning with his review of *The Bachelors* (1960) and ending with the essay reprinted here, “Stonewalling Toffs,” originally published in *The New Yorker*. Updike always saw Spark as a moralist with a caustic pen, and here, in reviewing *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), he found her true to form, lacerating the aristocratically pretentious Lord Lucan and his protectors—their moral blindness, class-based contempt, and genetic stupidity viciously exposed. Updike delineates that critical edge of Spark’s fiction, certainly honed to razor-sharp intensity in *Aiding and Abetting*, but an element of nearly all her novels (one thinks especially of *Not to Disturb*, *The Takeover* [1976], and *Symposium* [1990]). A poet himself, Updike draws appropriate attention to Spark’s language, which he aptly characterizes as “never ornate, it grows simpler . . . with Euclidean precision.”

John Lanchester’s perceptive essay, “In Sparkworld,” focuses on her last novel, *The Finishing School* (2004), and on Spark herself, whom he sees as “a sort of proto-postmodernist, a writer with a sharp and lasting interest in the arbitrariness of fictional conventions . . .

accompanied by a wish to toy with, to subvert, parody, and undermine them.” Using *The Comforters* and *The Girls of Slender Means* as scaffolding, Lanchester deftly reveals the structural mechanics of Spark’s fiction; yet he never reduces the work to mere technical performance, for he is keenly appreciative of Spark’s ultimately spiritual vantage point, noting, “In Spark’s fiction, we are never allowed to forget that the author, and indeed the reader, is subordinate to the final Author: our fictions must not ever seem to compete with His.” “In Sparkworld” is one contemporary writer’s homage to another.

“The Life” opens with a piece by Alan Taylor, who brings his own particular perspective as a Scotsman to the life and career of Muriel Spark. After visiting her in Arezzo in July 1990, Taylor became a close friend and confidant. Their friendship flourished as he occasionally accompanied her on travels abroad (Muriel disliked traveling alone and Penelope disliked flying anywhere). In “Muriel Spark: Scottish by Formation” (the characterization is her own), Taylor enriches our understanding of the deep and lasting impact of Spark’s first nineteen years in Edinburgh. The cultural traditions of Edinburgh, particularly the literary heritage of the Border Ballads with what she called their “steel and bite,” permeated the spirit and outlook of this writer in whose speech one could always detect the lilt and rhythms of Morningside.

From one of the giants of contemporary letters, Doris Lessing, comes a poignant memoir, “Now You See Her, Now You Don’t,” written especially for this volume. Lessing draws upon her own life experience in Africa to give us a rich sense of Muriel Spark’s life on that vast continent in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Though the two women never met while in Africa—Lessing frequented Salisbury and while Spark spent some time there, most of her time was spent moving about in Southern Rhodesia (Bulawayo and other more remote places)—their life stories manifest a number of striking parallels and coincidences. Their African days were days of discontent, isolation, and infrequent social pleasures, but most of all, of waiting. Both women went out of Africa and on to other worlds and literary fame, in Lessing’s telling phrase, “sifting gold from muddy experience.” As one great writer’s tribute to another, Lessing’s remembrance has unique power.

John Mortimer's "The Culture of an Anarchist: An Interview with Muriel Spark" gives us an insider's view: a close friend, literary colleague, and occasional summer neighbor in Tuscany as well, Mortimer prompted Spark to be particularly candid and personal. Mortimer's offhand wit and informal manner elicited telling responses on art and life. The interview, done in the late 1980s, remains fresh and engaging as the two cover familiar territory with enthusiasm and energy. Like Mortimer's, my own interview, "'Fascinated by Suspense': An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark," conducted over a decade later, covers a range of concerns and questions, all entertained with considerable grace and patience by Dame Muriel. She was never less than frank, forthcoming, and delightful. Both interviews conjure up a sense of a personable, engaging artist, dedicated to her work and eager to set the record straight about her life and accomplishment. Perhaps both give a sense of a rare privilege: an afternoon's civilized conversation with a great writer.

Barbara Epler was Muriel Spark's longtime publisher at New Directions Publishing Corporation. It is thanks to her that we now have so much of Spark's work in print in the United States. "Now I Know They Want Me Back-Stage" is an affectionate memoir chronicling some of her dealings with the author. Epler offers us a vivid panorama of portraits: Muriel in New York, Muriel in Tuscany, and most poignantly, Muriel in a dream vision. With an extraordinary lightness and certainty of touch, Barbara Epler gives us a Muriel Spark only a few were fortunate to know.

The title for this book comes from Spark's most famous novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Many years after leaving the Marcia Blaine School and Miss Brodie, one of her girls, Jenny, fell in love with a stranger who had also taken shelter from the rain beneath the entrance to a building in Rome. Nothing would come of it, nonetheless, "the . . . happening filled her with astonishment whenever it came to her in later days, with a sense of the hidden possibilities in all things" (79).

It is my hope, as well as that of my contributors, that readers of this volume will gain a keen sense of Muriel Spark as a person, derived in good measure from reading her own words, unfiltered and

uncensored, and a considerable critical appreciation of her work as articulated by some of her best readers. And perhaps some pleasure as well. Pleasure always figured large in Muriel's artistic scheme of things; she wanted very much to offer her readers the pleasures of the text, some measure of what she experienced as the creator. Once asked to characterize her life as novelist, she responded, with typical understatement and irony, "Shall we say I had fun with my imagination?" Perhaps readers of this volume, prompted to turn—or return—to Muriel Spark's novels, will share in that fun.

#### WORKS CITED

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