

Herman

Muriel Spark

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# Muriel Spark

**TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES**

*Edited by David Herman*



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## Preface

A special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to Muriel Spark (54.3, Fall 2008) laid important groundwork for the present volume. Because of the addition of three new essays, a reorganization of the previously published essays, a reworked and expanded introduction, and a comprehensive index, *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* affords a different—and, I hope, more cogent and cohesive—reading experience than did the special journal issue out of which the book grew.

As described more fully in my introduction, the volume is divided into three main parts, the first exploring Spark's contributions to Scottish and world literature, the second investigating how Spark's work relates to developments in late twentieth-century culture, and the third featuring detailed interpretations of texts by Spark. This organizational scheme should maximize the scholarly and pedagogical value of the book, since it enables readers to move naturally from material that focuses on Spark's background and influence as a writer, through chapters providing thick descriptions of her place in postwar culture, to chapters that offer interpretations of specific novels. At the same time, readers who wish to pinpoint discussions of particular novels, investigate Spark's use of a given fictional technique, or track recurrent themes will be able to do so by consulting the index that Adam Stier has compiled.

These features of the book underscore its main purpose: to provide students and faculty specialists alike with a one-stop resource gathering information about Spark's writing, its sources, and its legacies, while also offering current, theoretically informed but accessible interpretations of individual texts that can open up new ways of exploring and engaging with Spark's work. Target audiences thus consist of specialists in postwar British literature as well as instructors and students in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses on twentieth-century British literature, the postwar British novel, and postmodern fiction, as well as single-author seminars devoted to Spark. The volume is likely to be of interest, also, to specialists in and students of recent women's writing<sup>1</sup>—what with Hope Howell Hodgkins' chapter on Spark's and Barbara Pym's work vis-à-vis that of their male contemporaries, and Lisa Harrison's and Bran Nicol's chapters on Spark's experiences as an author and treatment of the theme of authorship, respectively.

Many people and institutions helped make this book possible. A research fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, coupled with an external fellowship subsidy from Ohio State University, afforded me with the time needed to complete this project, and I gratefully acknowledge this support. For support of a different but equally crucial kind, I thank all the contributors, whose hard work, insightful scholarship, and patient collegiality made them an exemplary team to work with. I am also grateful to Suzanne Flinchbaugh for her enthusiastic initial response to this project and for her expert and unstinting assistance ever since; I thank her and others at the Johns Hopkins University Press, including copyeditor Michele Callaghan and designer Martha Sewall, for skillfully guiding the book through the publication process. Furthermore, I am grateful to the entire editorial staff at *Modern Fiction Studies* who worked on the earlier special issue out of which the present volume grew, including editor John Duvall, associate editor Robert Marzec, and editorial assistants Jason Buchanan, Michael Mauritzen, Rebecca Nicholson-Weir, and Martin Whitehead. I would like to single out Mike Mauritzen for his detail-oriented, proactive help with all aspects of the special issue. For his part, John Duvall approved the journal issue in the first place and provided additional financial support for the publication of this volume. I thank Adam Stier for his careful work on the index; Aileen Christianson, James English, and Alison Lumsden for their early advice about the project; and David McClay, Robin Smith, and especially Sally Harrower at the National Library of Scotland for their gracious assistance when I visited the Muriel Spark archive in November 2008. I am grateful both to the Library and to Penelope Jardine, the literary trustee of the Muriel Spark's estate, for permission to quote from materials I discovered at the archive. Thanks are also due to the external reviewer whose comments on my proposal for this volume helped me make it a better book.

Finally, I thank Susan Moss for treasured experiences—in the Scottish Highlands, on the Gulf Coast of Florida, in the deserts of Arizona, and near our sheltering apple tree in Ohio—in the context of which my work on this volume took shape.

## Note

1. An undated fragment of a letter housed in the Muriel Spark Archive at the National Library of Scotland, however, reveals Spark's own reservations about the very concept or category of "women's writing." Commenting on the submission guidelines of a magazine

targeted at women, Spark writes: "What worries me, is the casual phrase 'of interest to a woman.' What is of interest to a woman? [ . . . ] most women's magazines assume a narrow range of interests in their readers" (Acc. 10989/118).

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## INTRODUCTION

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David Herman

### **"A Salutory Scar": Muriel Spark's Desegregated Art in the Twenty-First Century**

Intended in part to commemorate the death (on 13 April 2006) of Muriel Spark, one of the most important and innovative writers in English to come to maturity in the second half of the twentieth century, this volume also aims to take stock of Spark's enduring legacy—her status as an author whose writing practices have reshaped ways of understanding the scope and nature of fiction itself. The chapters assembled here explore, from multiple perspectives, the situation of Spark's work within the landscapes of postwar writing. What is more, the contributors collectively suggest the continuing relevance of Spark's oeuvre for the narrative traditions, representational projects, and broader cultural formations of the twenty-first century.

Spark was the author of twenty-two novels (seven of them published during the extraordinarily prolific period 1957–1963), more than a dozen short-story collections, several collections of poetry, a number of children's books, and multiple works of criticism, including volumes on William Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and the Brontës.<sup>1</sup> She established early on the strikingly sui generis style that became the hallmark of her fiction—a style combining a self-reflexive focus on novelistic technique, including modes of metafictional play, with a probing investigation of the moral, psychological, and institutional dimensions of human conduct. Hence Spark in effect opted out of the two responses to modernism that David Lodge has called antimodernism and postmodernism. Antimodernist writers such as Kingsley Amis and Evelyn Waugh sought to continue the tradition that modernism reacted against, operating under the assumption that practices of realism "modified to take account of changes in human

knowledge and material circumstances" were still "viable and valuable" (Lodge 6). By contrast, postmodernist writers such as Samuel Beckett and John Barth continued "the modernist critique of traditional realism, but [tried] to go beyond or around or underneath modernism, which for all its formal experiment and complexity held out to the reader the promise of meaning, if not of a meaning" (Lodge 12). Spark, however, chose a third path. Her fiction embraces (or rather extends and radicalizes) the modernist emphasis on technique while *also* projecting complex social worlds—worlds in which, in texts ranging from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) to *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), and *The Only Problem* (1984), characters are impinged on by powerful historical and political forces, their psychologies and interactions shaped by entrenched educational and religious institutions, ideologies of gender, and more or less dominant assumptions about the possibilities and limitations of human agency. Thus, as Marina MacKay argues in her contribution to this volume, Spark is "an amphibious figure"; in other words, her novels encompass tendencies displayed both by antimodernists advocating a midcentury return to realism and by postmodernist practitioners who did not share Spark's "capacious sociability, [her] meticulous curiosity about the specificities of midcentury manners." Spark's amphibious narrative practices set a precedent for later writers who have similarly worked to wed sometimes mind-bending formal innovation with the nuanced representation of sociohistorical circumstances, including not just English-language authors such as A. S. Byatt and the Ian McEwan of *Atonement*, for example, but writers from other traditions who have likewise pursued this third way between antimodernism and postmodernism, such as W. G. Sebald and Patrick Modiano.<sup>2</sup>

A number of commentators on Spark, as well as the author herself, have provided context for understanding this dialectical interplay between Spark's reflexive focus on narrative form and her engagement with the historical contingencies of lived experience, her dual commitment to innovation and representation. Spark found a different balancing point for these two sets of concerns in different works, providing grounds for the strong claim that her writing practices were in some sense dependent on the nonresolution of this dialectical tension.<sup>3</sup> Reflexively foregrounding issues of form, Spark's first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), focuses metaleptically on a protagonist who gradually comes to realize that she is a character in a novel.<sup>4</sup> In Alan Bold's characterization, this novel constitutes "an experimental exploration of the formal nature of fictional truth" (34), and in a 1963 interview with Frank Kermode, Spark herself referred to the novel as "a novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel

sort of thing, you see" (qtd. in Bold 34). Situated near the other pole of the Sparkian dialectic—the pole of engagement with sociohistorical contexts and contingencies—is the novel that many commentators characterize as a kind of outlier or exception within Spark's oeuvre, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, which (as discussed by John Glavin in chapter 7 of this volume) is set in Jerusalem and includes details about the trial of Adolf Eichmann that took place there in 1961.<sup>5</sup> As Norman Page puts it, *The Mandelbaum Gate* "could almost have been written by George Eliot [ . . . ] if she had been writing in the 1970s instead of a hundred years earlier" (56).

Other texts in Spark's corpus, however, are more difficult to place (or place in their entirety) in relation to the twin concerns of formal innovation and responsible representation. For example, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* metafictional play trades off with analysis of group dynamics and the logic of fascism. Sandy Stranger and Jenny Gray string together the most glaring clichés of romance to compose "The Mountain Eyrie," an idealized narrative of Hugh Carruthers, Brodie's former lover; their account throws into question the status of the narrator's own discourse (to what extent is all narration an assemblage of clichés?). Yet the novel also probes how Sandy's bullying of Mary Macgregor is linked to her (Sandy's) fear of the disorder represented by the unemployed people she sees during the class field trip to St Giles Cathedral. More generally, through its portrayal of Mary the text suggests how scapegoating can serve, in the microcosm of the Brodie set and also the macrocosm of German and Italian fascism, as a mechanism for reinforcing group cohesion. Or take the 1970 novel *The Driver's Seat*, which Spark acknowledged to be her personal favorite among the novels ("The Same" 229). Here, as Norman Page remarks, the author may seem "to be following writers of the French *nouveau roman* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, who conceived the role of fiction as the dispassionate description of the external world as a substitute for the traditional novel's concern with character" (73).<sup>6</sup> Yet the bizarre and macabre plot in which the protagonist concertedly brings about her own brutal murder also raises disturbingly far-reaching questions about the threat of sexual violence against women who seek to assert control over their own lives in the manner advocated in the feminist discourse that was contemporary with Spark's novel.<sup>7</sup>

Further, both Spark's 1971 address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, "The Desegregation of Art," and *Curriculum Vitae*, the autobiographical volume that was published in 1993 and that covers the period from the beginning of Spark's life to her first real success as a writer in the later 1950s, throw additional light on this same tension between innovation and representation—reflexivity

and reportage—in the author's oeuvre. In the autobiography, Spark frames her account in terms of a desire to set the record straight, a determination "to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses" (11). Yet the sequence of rubrics used in the first chapter to organize Spark's presentation of her early memories ("Bread, Butter and Florrie Forde" [followed immediately by "Bread" and then "Butter"], "Tea," "Commodities," "Neighbours," "Myths and Images," "The Doorbell," and others) suggests in almost Borges-like fashion the multiplicity of ways in which situations, objects, and events can be ordered through categories or descriptive nomenclatures.<sup>8</sup> Spark thus highlights the arbitrariness of singling out any one system of categories as best suited for capturing the facts of the matter. Analogously, Spark recounts how after high school she enrolled in a college known for its practical and businesslike teaching methods and for its emphasis on scientific and technical instruction (102–3). It was here that Spark honed her skills in *précis*-writing and indulged her love of economical prose and her fascination with "good managerial type-speech"; it was from about this time, too, that Spark began to be convinced that "the essentials of literature were . . . outside of literature; they were elsewhere, out in the world" (103). But over the course of her apprenticeship as a writer Spark would also turn to literature itself to discover the essentials of literature—and even the essentials of the world. Hence her use of fictional plots to explore the more general strategies of emplotment by which human beings order events into narrative patterns so as to make sense of them.<sup>9</sup> *Curriculum Vitae* thus traces the formation of an author with dual values, interests, and priorities: the eager student of *précis*-writing in business settings whose first published novel was *The Comforters*, which Spark goes on to characterize as follows: "That novel was thought to be difficult, especially in those days—for it is true that one forms and 'educates' one's own public. Readers of novels were not yet used to the likes of me, and some will never be" (208).

In "The Desegregation of Art," from which the title of the present section is taken, Spark suggests a reason or motive for this double orientation of her fictional practice—her practice of writing under the assumption that the essentials of literature can be found both inside and outside literature itself. Significantly, the title of Spark's address—which was delivered in the United States in the same year that the Supreme Court ruled that forced busing of students may be mandated to achieve racial desegregation—enacts the logic of reintegration that also forms its topic. The title brings the subject of art into implicit relation with legal, educational, and more broadly social institutions bound up with attempts during the civil rights movement

to overcome inequities based on racial identity. More explicitly, the address suggests that Spark's dual commitment to innovation and representation is rooted in what she takes to be the basic conditions for art, rather than in the vagaries of her personal experience or the idiosyncrasies of her own writing process. Spark begins by noting that "I have never from my earliest memories known any other life or way of seeing things but that of an artist, a changer of actuality into something else" (33). But the question foregrounded by the address concerns the calculus—or alchemy—that regulates such aesthetic transformations of the actual; at issue is what methods of transformation might make art a more integral part of everyday life, even as it maintains a necessarily critical stance toward the sphere of the everyday. Spark argues more specifically that the tradition of socially conscious art, and in particular literature based on "depicted suffering, whether in social life or in family life . . . isn't achieving its end or illuminating our lives any more" (34). Spark goes on to explain: "the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality . . . cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule. And I see no other living art form for the future" (35).

One danger with literature that doesn't take ridicule as its guiding principle is that readers may well "feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions that they have been induced to feel";<sup>10</sup> another (related) danger is that "wherever there is a cult of the victim, such being human nature, there will be an obliging cult of twenty equivalent victimizers." Art, instead, should engage in a ruthless mocking of violence in any form, displaying "a less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong" (Spark, "Desegregation" 35). Whereas the spirit animating earnest protests is often short-lived, "the art of ridicule, if it is on the mark—and if it is not on the mark it is not art at all—can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyze its object" (36).

Thus, what Spark calls for in her address, and what she exemplifies in her own fictional methods, is an art rich in Brechtian estrangement effects—effects that call attention to the constructedness of the fictional scenarios being portrayed in order to inhibit readerly immersion and promote instead a critical engagement with those situations and events. But the Sparkian art of ridicule also requires, beyond such illusion-breaking reflexivity, an active targeting of social practices and institutions that sanction any form of violence, in whose mocking, sardonic representation lies the *raison d'être* of

art itself.<sup>11</sup> The *desegregation of art*: the phrase itself encapsulates both the scope of Spark's fictional project and the dialectical tension that drives it.

### A Synopsis of the Volume

In a volume devoted to an author whose texts cut against the grain of master narratives about identity, gender, religion, culture, and history, it is especially fitting that the contributors would adopt a diversity of critical perspectives on Spark's texts and use a variety of analytic tools—historical/archival, psychoanalytic, queer-theoretical, narratological, and other—to take the measure of her achievement.<sup>12</sup> In their various ways, however, the chapters assembled here all suggest how Spark's work points the way toward desegregating fiction, by bringing it into a critical and, where warranted, mocking relation with the concepts, practices, and institutions of everyday life. Furthermore, the chapters discuss texts that were written over several decades of Spark's career, revealing, across the range of Spark's achievement, her longstanding concern with balancing the requirements of formal innovation against the imperatives of responsible representation.<sup>13</sup>

The two chapters included in Part I of the volume, "Spark as Scottish and World Author," sketch out Spark's situation in and contributions to both local and global literary traditions. These chapters provide context for understanding the forces that shaped Spark's corpus as well as the impact of that corpus on late twentieth-century (and now early twenty-first-century) literature and culture. First, in "'Fully to Savour Her Position': Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity," Gerard Carruthers outlines strategies for exploring Spark's relation to Scottish culture, in part by drawing on ideas from Spark's own novels to recharacterize culture itself as a multiplicitous convergence—an imaginary meeting point—of various texts and traditions. Next, Lisa Harrison, in "'The Magazine That Is Considered the Best in the World': Muriel Spark and the *New Yorker*," engages in a complementary investigation of how Spark's decades-long relationship with the *New Yorker* helped make her a world literary figure—especially when *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* appeared in its entirety in the 14 October 1961 issue of the magazine.

Carruthers begins by disputing the premises of an argument made by another Scottish novelist, Robin Jenkins—the argument, namely, that Spark is a kind of "cosmopolitan misfit" rather than a Scottish writer. Pointing to the "essentialist cultural nationalism" that underwrites this claim, Carruthers notes that Spark herself resisted such essentializing habits of mind, perhaps because of her own

heterogeneous background and life trajectory as a half-Jewish, half-Protestant convert to Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> Here Carruthers points to the anti-essentialism evident in Spark's 1963 story, "The Gentile Jewesses," generally thought to be a trial run at what became *The Mandelbaum Gate*: "the narrator refuses to be denied her Jewish heritage simply because of Talmudic law and defiantly embraces and gently mocks this law as a person who is possessed of enough imaginative empathy for her Jewish forebears for them and their origins to matter to her." For Spark, then, identity is not a built-in essence but a function of living in (actual and imagined) relation to people and places, texts and things; hence Spark's comment, which Carruthers quotes in his chapter, that "Edinburgh is the place that I, a constitutional exile, am essentially exiled from." True, Spark's oeuvre engages with aspects of the Scottish context; for example, both *The Comforters* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* use the then recently republished *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg (which were originally published in 1824) as a key intertext addressing the Calvinist world picture, which also plays a role in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Yet because of Spark's scholarly studies of Mary Shelley and the Brontës she may have approached Hogg as a Romantic writer rather than a Scottish writer per se. As Carruthers puts it, "Spark certainly comes to have Hogg in her literary genes, but this is not some set of essentially national genes." After a discussion of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* as a hybrid text in which Spark fuses (and also parodies) the "English" tendency toward domestic realism and an indigenous "Scottish" tradition of supernatural ballads, followed by a reading of *Brodie's* similarly extended engagement with Scottish religious, cultural, and literary traditions, Carruthers concludes by arguing that in Spark's fiction "truth and transcendent identity can never be exactly located but are indicated through the imaginative aspirations both of Spark herself and her characters."

Meanwhile, Harrison uses Spark's relationship with the *New Yorker* to explore how the writer came to be seen not just as a Scottish author but also as a major contributor to world literature. As Harrison shows, Spark's connection with the magazine lasted throughout her writing career; her first appearance goes back to 1954, when one of the critical works that she co-edited with Derek Stanford received a brief review. Through her archival research on Spark's unpublished correspondence with the magazine's editors during her most prolific writing period, 1957–1967, Harrison throws light on the circumstances that led to the *New Yorker's* publication of *Brodie* and the subsequent offer to Spark of a first-reading agreement, which, renewed annually through 1979, allowed the magazine the right of first refusal for all of the author's fiction and essays. As Harrison also shows, Spark's

correspondence with the magazine's editors reveals Spark's activities and whereabouts during her extended stays in New York City during the years 1962–1967, affording new evidence for study of the effects of locale on (and its representation in) Spark's fiction. Going on to discuss Spark's later relationship with the magazine, Harrison indicates how the *New Yorker* not only shaped Spark's international reception but became the repository of autobiographical material that postdates *Curriculum Vitae*, some of it illuminating Spark's writing methods. More generally, Harrison's account of Spark's relationship with the *New Yorker* points up the need for a broader scholarly project: namely, reconceiving the modern Scottish literary canon by situating writers like Spark in an emergent world literary culture.<sup>15</sup>

Along these same lines, Part II of the volume is titled "Situating Spark in Postwar Culture." Although chapters 3 through 6, which make up this section, sometimes use particular works by Spark as case studies, they focus on how Spark's oeuvre relates to the broader contexts of postwar culture. Patricia Waugh examines how, after World War II, materialist philosophies morphed into a metaphysics of the material, and how Spark's texts respond both formally and thematically to this new worldview. Marina MacKay uses the idea of treason as a guiding thread in her wide-ranging discussion of Spark's oeuvre and its relation to contemporary developments in the cultural field. Bran Nicol relates Spark's texts to changing conceptions of authorship by examining Spark's self-reflexive treatment of authors in her fiction. Finally, Hope Howell Hodgkins, putting Spark's work into dialogue with the fictions of Barbara Pym, investigates how the two writers' concern with style links up with issues of gender in postwar contexts.

In "Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularization, and Psychosis," in a way that harks back to the dialectic between innovation and representation discussed earlier in this introduction, Waugh interprets Spark's defamiliarizing narrative experiments not as a retreat from but rather a strategy for engaging with broader intellectual and cultural developments. These developments include the consolidation of secularism and, with it, the rise of a radically materialist worldview. This worldview is grounded in "a kind of sociobiological and Hobbesian epistemology that reduces the human to an elaborate kind of machine open to purely causal explanation," and it is thus incapable of registering humans' experience of being-in-the-world or "ispeity," their "fundamental sense and experience of selfhood and being as well as their historical modes of expression." Rather than trying to (re)categorize Spark as a "Catholic writer," Waugh contends that one of Spark's overarching novelistic projects was to use the illusion-breaking potential of (meta)fiction



to chronicle and interrogate what is entailed by the materialist world picture. To investigate that picture's power and reach, Spark relied on the ability of fictional narratives to unmake—or rather reflexively foreground the made-up-ness of—the worlds in which they simultaneously ask readers to participate imaginatively. Novels like *The Driver's Seat* and *The Hothouse by the East River* thus evoke strikingly vivid fictional worlds, while also using those worlds as thought-experiments exploring what it would be like to live-out a radical materialism that leaves no place for ipseity. More precisely, these novels suggest that living in strict accordance with the materialist world picture would be tantamount to psychosis. Yet as noted earlier, Spark also rejected sentimentalism, or the deliberate elicitation of readerly empathy, as a counter-response to the mechanistic world picture. Drawing on multiple works by Spark to examine her strategies for dealing with this dilemma, Waugh's discussion demonstrates how Spark's innovative novelistic techniques, far from exemplifying a kind of metafictional introversion, instead foreground "the ethical consequences of expanding a reduced conceptualization of matter into a metaphysics of materialism and the kind of intelligence required to critique that process without falling prey to nostalgia or sentimentalism."

In "Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason," MacKay likewise connects Spark's fictional methods with larger cultural and historical concerns. MacKay argues that Spark's treatment of the theme of treason is "intractably real-worldly and historical, intimately connected to the political contexts in which she began her career as a novelist" while also providing "a different way of thinking about [Spark's] concerns with the textual, fantastical, and world-making force of the imagination that points toward an incipient postmodernity: treason, for Spark, is always aligned with forms of political and social creativity." MacKay grounds her analysis in a broader mid-twentieth-century concern with the problem of treason—that is, "the individual's readiness to resist the claims that the nation-state makes on its citizens"—as World War II gave way to the Cold War. Here MacKay notes the relevance of another midcentury female author, Rebecca West, who wrote several studies of treason that were interested less in the specific traitorous acts involved than in what they suggest about the nature of the link between individuals and larger communities. Further, as in Spark's novels, West's studies explore the traitor's ability to construct and live within alternate realities—in parallel with the way Jean Brodie, for example, attempts to make her life extraordinary through fantasy. Likewise, MacKay finds in West's study of the 1945 trial for high treason of William Joyce a parallel to Sandy Stranger's experience as simultaneously an outsider and a member of the Brodie cult. MacKay also discusses Spark's partici-