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# MURIEL SPARK

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*Mark Gerson*

MURIEL SPARK

Shopping in Peckham Rye market August 1961

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To Susan and Jacob

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## Biographical Outline

- 1918 Born Muriel Sarah Camberg in Edinburgh to parents from mixed national and ethnic backgrounds.
- 1929-30 Educated at the Presbyterian James Gillespie's Girls' School by Miss Christina Kay who eventually inspired the character of Miss Jean Brodie.
- 1937 Married S. O. Spark in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).
- 1938 Her son, Robin, born in Bulawayo.
- 1944-5 Returns to England on a troop ship after divorcing S. O. Spark who is discovered to have a violent nervous disorder. Her son is left in a convent school in South Africa until the war is over and is subsequently raised in Edinburgh by her parents. Spark finds work in the Political Intelligence Office during the war.
- 1947-9 Works for the Poetry Society in London and edits *The Poetry Review*.
- 1951 'The Seraph and the Zambesi', her first published fiction, wins the prestigious *Observer* short story prize.
- 1950-3 Publishes books on a range of literary figures including William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë, John Masfield.
- 1952 *The Fanfarlo and Other Verse* published.
- 1953 Joins the Anglican Church.
- 1954 Converts to Roman Catholicism and subsequently has a breakdown.
- 1957 Her first novel, *The Comforters*, published to critical acclaim.
- 1959 *Memento Mori* published and establishes her as an outstanding novelist.
- 1961 Gains international recognition and a popular reader-

- ship with the publication of her sixth novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.
- 1962–5 Lives in New York. Writes regularly for the *New Yorker*.
- 1965 *The Mandelbaum Gate*, set in Jerusalem, wins the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.
- 1966 Moves to Italy where she has subsequently lived.
- 1967 Awarded the Order of the British Empire.
- 1968–71 A period of extraordinary creativity which sees the publication of *The Public Image*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Not to Disturb*.
- 1978 Elected an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1981 *Loitering with Intent* published, her sixteenth novel, and a virtuoso return to the autobiographical mode.
- 1984 *The Only Problem*, published, which marked her preoccupation with the Book of Job and the question of evil.
- 1990 *Symposium*, her nineteenth novel, published.
- 1992 *Curriculum Vitae*, her first volume of memoirs, published.
- 1993 Made a Dame of the British Empire.
- 1994 *The Collected Stories* published.
- 1996 *Reality and Dreams* published. Made a Commandeur in the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.
- 1997 Awarded the David Cohen British Literature Prize for a lifetime's achievement in writing.
- 1999 Awarded an Honorary Doctorate at Oxford University.
- 2000 Her twenty-first novel, *Aiding and Abetting*, is published.

## Abbreviations and References

All references to Muriel Spark's works are taken from the Penguin edition unless stated otherwise.

- AA *Aiding and Abetting* (2000)
- AC *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974)
- B *The Bachelors* (1960)
- BPR *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960)
- C *The Comforters* (1957)
- CS *The Collected Stories of Muriel Spark* (1994)
- CV *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (1992)
- DA 'The Desegregation of Art' (1970), *American Academy of Arts and Letters* (New York: The Blashfield Foundation, 1971)
- DS *The Driver's Seat* (1970)
- FCA *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988)
- GSM *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963)
- HER *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973)
- HF Frank Kermode, 'The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven Novelists', in Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (London: Fontana, 1977).
- HIN 'How I Became a Novelist', *John O'London's Weekly* (1 December 1960)
- JM *John Masefield* (London: Peter Nevill, 1953)
- LWI *Loitering with Intent* (1981)
- MC 'My Conversion', *The Twentieth Century* (Autumn 1961)
- MM *Memento Mori* (1959)
- MG *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965)
- MJS 'The Mystery of Job's Suffering', *Church of England Newspaper* (15 April 1955)

- ND    *Not to Disturb* (1971)  
 OP    *The Only Problem* (1984)  
 PI    *The Public Image* (1968)  
 PMJB *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)  
 R    *Robinson* (1958)  
 RA    'The Religion of an Agnostic: A Sacramental View of the  
       World of Marcel Proust', *Church of England Newspaper* (27  
       November 1953)  
 RD    *Reality and Dreams* (1996)  
 S    *Symposium* (1990)  
 T    *The Takeover* (1976)  
 TR    *Territorial Rights* (1979)  
 WIR    'What Images Return', in Karl Miller (ed.), *Memoirs of a  
       Modern Scotland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)  
 YMD    *The Young Man who Discovered the Secret of Life and Other  
       Stories* (London: Travelman Publishing, 1999)

## Prologue

Although some of her poetry and criticism is explored, this book will be primarily concerned with Muriel Spark's fiction, which includes twenty-one novels, from *The Comforters* (1957) to *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), and over thirty short stories. During a career which has spanned more than fifty years, her fictional output is rightly considered to be one of the most sustained and innovative contributions to the British novel since the war. At the same time, she has been consistently marginalized by being labelled as a 'Catholic writer'. For this reason, critical responses to her work have often focused on her as an unchanging moralist as if the issues which she addresses have remained the same. This study aims to question this approach by showing the extent to which Spark's conversion to Roman Catholicism did not, as many assume, transform her personal and literary sense of otherness. Instead, this book will focus on her playful and anarchic fiction, which disrupts the certainties of her supposedly stable identity as a 'Catholic writer'.

## Life-Stories: Redeeming the Past

Born in 1918, Spark was nearly 40 years of age when she completed *The Comforters* (1957), her first novel. Over the next five decades, she published twenty-one novels, three volumes of short stories, and the occasional play, collection of poetry and children's work. The phenomenal success of Spark's sixth novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) – as a stage-play, feature film and television series – has ensured that she retains a popular appeal. After gaining innumerable literary prizes and academic awards, she is now widely considered to be one of the 'most engaging, most tantalising' writers of her generation.<sup>1</sup> What is extraordinary about Spark's achievement is that as well as having a large international readership she manages to engage with many of the most serious intellectual issues of her time. It is typical of her work that it both gestures towards and acknowledges many of the debates and concerns of the age without, ever, being wholly reliant on them. Academic critics have begun to appropriate Spark in the name of literary and cultural theory, but this can be somewhat reductive. As Bent Nordhjem has argued, Spark's engagement with fashionable theoretical questions is always partial and fragmentary:

Within their narrow range Muriel Spark's novels in their way incorporate all the fashionable isms of the modern scene: surrealism, existentialism, absurdism, structuralism, feminism... They do not expound them but take them as read. The Spark world is made up of what little the storm has left. The novels focus on the fragments scattered by the trends.<sup>2</sup>

Spark's ability to subsume the larger cultural questions of her day is in part a consequence of her formative years as a literary



critic. Along with a collection of poetry, her books in the early 1950s consisted of a tribute to William Wordsworth; a reassessment of Mary Shelley and selection of her letters; editions of the poems and of letters of Emily Brontë; and an account of John Masefield. Spark might well have continued as a critic and occasional poet if it were not for the publication of 'The Seraph and the Zambesi' (1951) which won the *Observer* short story prize. This story made such a profound impact that it literally transformed Spark's life. After it was published, she was immediately introduced to the editor and staff of the *Observer* and began writing occasionally for the newspaper. Because she was poverty-stricken and unwell at the time, Graham Greene offered to support her financially and was an influential patron (CV 192). More importantly, 'The Seraph and the Zambesi' attracted the attention of Alan Maclean, the fiction editor at Macmillan, who commissioned her to write a novel and collection of short stories which subsequently became *The Comforters* and *The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories* (1958). Such was Spark's meteoric rise as a writer of fiction.

After the mid-1950s, Spark was transformed from being a poet and critic to a much-vaunted novelist whose reputation is sustained by many of the most influential authors and critics in post-war Britain and America.<sup>3</sup> As a result of her late start as a novelist, Spark has been reluctant to describe herself merely as a fiction writer. In her autobiography, she states that the passage from poetry to prose felt, at the time, perfectly natural as 'the novel as an art form was essentially a variation of a poem' (CV 206). Her literary style, therefore, has self-consciously mixed the exactness and intensity of poetic language with the more expansive and relaxed mode of the contemporary novel. Spark, to a large extent, derived her stylistic principles from her neo-classical poetry and she has, in this regard, applied the neo-classical tenets of lucidity, precision and formal elegance to her prose. Her narrators gain their authority both from their punctiliousness and from their constant undermining of clichés and looseness of thought – most famously with regard to Miss Jean Brodie's habitual description of her girls as the '*crème de la crème*'.

In Spark's early interviews she stressed that she wished to do away with the 'wantonness' of the novel form (in stark contrast

to her neo-classical poetry) and she instead intended to 'stick to a formal outline and say what I wanted to say in that limit' (HF 132). For this reason, Spark has a refined and winning literary style which deliberately masks her more discursive and extravagant intellectual ambitions. As Alan Bold has argued, Spark synthesizes the 'linguistic cunning of poetry with the seeming credibility of prose'.<sup>4</sup> Given the mental and physical anguish which Spark endured before she published *The Comforters*, which will be referred to below, it is clear that she did not wish to relinquish her identity as a poet as this had sustained her through some very difficult years. In characteristic fashion, she thus constructs herself as a poetic novelist or novelistic poet, the first of many such syntheses of opposites, which goes to the heart of her poised and self-confident use of language.

Her study of John Masefield, published in 1953, was an early example of a figure who combined both the poetic and narrative arts. In her preface she states that 'those parts of his life story which the poet himself has written about never fail to give the impression that life has always presented itself to him, as it were, in the narrative form' (JM, p. x). After *The Comforters*, Spark also began to use the art of fiction to turn her own life-story into a 'narrative form'. Patrick Parrinder has rightly dissented from the consensus that she is the most impersonal and detached of novelists and has spoken of her 'controlling personal vision; a vision which reveals itself through the...anaesthetisation of strongly emotive aspects of reality'.<sup>5</sup> In her influential discussion with Frank Kermode, Spark describes her turn to fiction from poetry, after she converted, as 'probably just a justification for the time I wasted doing something else'. She goes on to say that her novels are an attempt to 'redeem the time' (HF 132) so that her years before *The Comforters* 'won't be wasted – it won't be wasted until I'm dead' (HF 132). In these redemptive terms, her first forty years have become the waste material for much of her subsequent fiction. As late as *Loitering with Intent* (1981) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), Spark was to imaginatively reinvent her past selves and to reclaim her wilderness years for the artistic sphere.

Her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (1992), is an account of her life leading up to the publication

of *The Comforters* and covers much the same ground as her 1980s fiction. But, unlike these earlier works, it is a curiously taciturn document and tends to establish what Spark regards as purely factual links between her novels and her life-history. As a novelist, Spark does not make easy connections between fiction and reality as her writing constantly redefines the meaning and value of the stories which her characters tell about their world. But her autobiography assumes that there is a simple and unequivocal relationship between her life and work. The main reason for this single-mindedness is that she is trying to put the record straight in *Curriculum Vitae* and is countering, in particular, the dangerous 'mythomania' (CV 191) of Derek Stanford, a one-time friend and collaborator. As in the plot of many of her novels, most markedly *A Far Cry from Kensington*, Stanford is cast as the false story-teller who can potentially destroy an individual. As she states in the introduction to *Curriculum Vitae*, 'lies are like fleas hopping from here to there, sucking the blood of the intellect' (CV 11). In her autobiography, Spark remains a moralist, while in her fiction, especially after the 1970s, she is playful and ambiguous and implicates her own art in the act of lying.

Her formative experiences, recounted with considerable dispassion, indicate both the comforts and extremes that make up her early life. What is especially startling is the extent to which the book 'anaesthetizes' (to use Parrinder's term) the violence and suffering which she encountered in her first four decades. About half her autobiography deals with her comfortable upbringing in Edinburgh from her birth in 1918 to her departure to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1937. There are some euphemistic references to the 'social nervousness' (CV 100) in 1930s Edinburgh during the great depression and the difficulties which Spark encountered, as a young woman, in trying to obtain a job. Her subsequent disastrous marriage to Sydney Oswald Spark and brief stay with her husband in Africa from 1937 to 1944 is dealt with cautiously as Sydney's violent nervous disorders, and life-long mental instability, is alluded to with a good deal of circumspection. With typical redemptive perversity, however, Spark keeps her husband's name, as Camberg was 'comparatively flat. Spark seemed to have some ingredient of life and fun' (CV 132).

Curiously, Spark has restricted her experiences of Africa to a few important stories, such as 'The Seraph and the Zambesi', 'The Go-Away Bird' (1958) and 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' (1961), and to key references throughout her work. But the association between the natural beauty of Africa and a much-needed 'spiritual strength' (CV 128) is the beginning of a lifelong connection between art and the primitive which Spark explores in much of her fiction. In her autobiography, she speaks of the Victoria Falls as 'one of those works of nature that cannot be distinguished from a sublime work of art' (CV 128) and, crucially, 'there was an element of primitive truth and wisdom [in Africa] that gave me strength' (CV 119). The force of nature will, as we shall see, act as an important counterpoint to Spark's increasingly apocalyptic view of the decline of Western civilization.

After her return to England during the war on a troop ship, a journey which is nobly underplayed in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark recounts the difficulties in bringing her child to London after the war which meant that he was eventually raised by her parents in Edinburgh. Many of Spark's female protagonists have young children who, rather like her view of a primitive Africa, are the receptacles for an essential set of spiritual values. In a telling story, 'The First Year of My Life' (1967), Spark presents the First World War through the eyes of a new-born child as 'babies, in their waking hours, know everything that is going on everywhere in the world' (CS 301). These supernatural powers of perception, a kind of innocent omniscience, are supposedly 'brainwashed out of us' (CS 301) after our first year. Like Spark, who also significantly came into a blood-ridden world in 1918, the baby 'had been born into a bad moment in the history of the world' and is rendered glum-looking as it witnesses 'infinite slaughter' (CS 303). Only after a fatuous speech by Asquith in the House of Commons, about the 'cleansing and purging' (CS 307) effects of the war, does the baby smile. Spark's preoccupation with suffering and rebirth in the 1950s, particularly as filtered through the book of Job, can be related to this story and eventually became the subject of her aptly named *The Only Problem* (1984).

Spark's work as a 'black propagandist' in the last year of the Second World War is represented through secondary sources in

her autobiography but is dramatically rendered in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973). After this wartime activity, where she helped to present a fictionalized version of the truth to the Germans, Spark was well aware of the effects of mythologizing the world. Her fraught time working for the Poetry Society in London, from 1947 to 1948, is recounted with relish in her memoir even though it was a clearly painful experience and is, in part, the subject of *Loitering with Intent*. Her extreme poverty and breakdown in the 1950s are touched upon in her autobiography but minimized (they are documented in detail in her personal papers). Spark wishes to avoid a too easy transformation of her suffering, by turning it seamlessly into art, which means that she often prefers silence or a more cunning means of indirectly referring to her unredeemed sense of waste. The limits of her impersonal voice can be found in her many characters on the verge of madness who constantly expose the violence and upheaval beneath her supposedly cool narrative surface. In her memoir, however, Spark has so transcended her early suffering that to reopen old wounds would, it seems, negate her subsequent success. No wonder she dots her autobiography, especially after moments of trauma, with a continuous refrain about starting 'life afresh' (CV 133) or a 'new life' (CV 211).

There is, of course, nothing unusual in a writer using his or her life-story in varied and often contradictory ways as material for their subsequent poetry and fiction. The fact that Spark, in her memoir, chooses to turn some aspects of her early life into a narrative and to ignore certain other aspects is also quite understandable. Where these issues become complicated, however, is in their being intimately bound up with her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1954 (after a brief flirtation with the Anglican Church in 1953). Most critics have noted that Spark not only converted to the Church of Rome in 1954 but also to the art of the novel. Her acknowledged double conversion has led to the mistaken conclusion that there is an unproblematic connection between her religious and artistic quest for transfiguration and narrative order. Peter Kemp, an otherwise perceptive and reliable reader of Spark, concludes his study with the following: 'An artistic dislike of waste, the redundant, the inaccurate, a religious striving after harmony and integra-

tion: these dictate what is in the fiction and what shape it takes'.<sup>6</sup> That there is, somehow, an organic coherence between her religion and art has led virtually all of Spark's critics to label her reductively a 'Catholic writer'.

The Catholic convert, in this received version of Spark, is precisely meant to close off one set of possibilities, and one version of the self, and to embrace a radically new and all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*. Spark's fiction has, as a consequence, been read as a 'spiritual autobiography' which distinguishes, above all, between the self before and after conversion. Each novel, according to this interpretation, becomes a kind of ongoing conversion, transforming the author anew, and distancing her from her previous self.<sup>7</sup> The abiding problem with thinking of Spark in this way is that it tends to set up an oversimple model of conversion which unproblematically splits the self into old and new, before and after, inner and outer. Conversion, in these terms, is turned into a form of determinism and becomes a rather too facile act of redemption.

The term 'convert' has an abundance of meanings and etymologies of which Spark seems to be aware. It ranges from the hardened conformities of religious conversion to a softer, more amorphous and troubling form of exchange which includes the conversion of life into art or materiality into spirituality. Even as late as her story 'Another Pair of Hands' (1985), she portrays a character who 'converted' (CS 338) with herself. Spark's central figures are often doubled and redoubled, such as Dougal Douglas or Douglas Dougal in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), and thus become their own converse. The softer form of conversion as exchange enables Spark, in her writing, to connect different realms so that her fictional domain is always perceived from competing or contradictory perspectives. What interests me about Spark is precisely the extent to which she denies a single redemptive potential within her fiction and thus disturbs a conversionist orthodoxy.

Instead of thinking of conversion as a unitary and untroubled form of exchange, Cauri Viswanathan has maintained that religious conversion is a model of 'dissent'. In her reading, conversion is primarily a form of doubleness which 'destabilizes' modern society as it 'crosses fixed boundaries between communities and identities'. According to this argument, the mixing of

two different cultures inevitably creates a sense in which any one ideology can be viewed from an estranged and defamiliarized perspective. Far from merely superseding the past, conversion is seen primarily as an interpretative act which perceives one world through the eyes of another.<sup>8</sup> Spark, in these terms, reinterprets the secular novel as a parodic form of spiritual transfiguration, while her Catholicism is observed with an artist's sceptical eye. Conversion, far from being an all-encompassing orthodoxy, becomes for Viswanathan a form of heterodoxy which endlessly multiplies official discourse.

Although Viswanathan is correct to highlight the subversive potential within conversion, she overstates her case by focusing only on the question of dissent, as opposed to religious assent, even in relation to a figure as orthodox as John Henry Newman. Spark is especially enticing because she illustrates both the authoritarian and the anarchic potential within the act of conversion. Whereas most critics think of her as an unchanging moralist, I want to argue that the easy division of the self – and by extension the world – into good and evil is only one partial response to conversion. Certainly, by the time of *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), Spark was exploring at length the heterodox potential of her conversion, which culminated in the rejection of a moral perspective in her key 1970 essay, 'The Desegregation of Art'. By the time of *The Hothouse by the East River*, Spark was claiming that 'there isn't any war and peace any more, no good and evil... There's only one area of conflict left and that's between absurdity and intelligence' (HER 63).

At the beginning of her career as a novelist, in marked contrast to her later sense of amoral absurdity, Spark was to articulate the orthodox reading of conversion, influenced by Cardinal Newman, as a means of creating narrative and moral order out of the waste and disorder of her early years. Here is Spark's much-cited 1961 interview on her conversion, which she has since repudiated, where she describes Catholicism as a 'norm from which one can depart' (MC 60). She goes on to relate her reasons for conversion to her 'breakdown' at the time:

The first reaction I had when I became a Catholic was that my mind was far too crowded with ideas, all teeming in disorder. This was part of my breakdown. The oddest, most peculiar variety of themes

and ideas of all sorts teemed in my head. I have never known such mental activity. It made me suffer a lot. But as I got better I was able to take them one at a time. ... It was like getting a new gift. (MC 60)

Catholicism, in these orthodox terms, becomes an ordering principle as well as an act of faith: 'I used to worry until I got a sense of order, a sense of proportion. At least I hope I've got it now. You need it to be either a writer or a Christian' (MC 63). Her conversion thus provided her with a renewed healthy identity and the ability to write in a controlled manner. Unlike Spark herself, critics have tended to habitually repeat these statements, as if they were writ in stone, to lend weight to her credentials as a wholly Catholic writer – in the great British tradition of Ford Madox Ford, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. To be sure, while Spark was especially valued by Greene and Waugh – and *The Comforters* is not unlike Waugh's *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) – she has, above all else, mapped out her own unique perspective on the world. As she states in 'The Desegregation of Art': 'I think as an artist, I live as one' and 'the art of literature is a personal expression of ideas' (DA 21–2).

The problem with placing Spark in a tradition of Catholic writing – or any other monolithic tradition for that matter – is that she self-consciously resists such classifications. Certainly, throughout her career, Spark gained a good deal from avant-garde movements such as the French *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the British 'experimentalism' of B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose in the 1950s and 1960s; feminist writing of the 1970s; and postmodern and magical realist fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, she has continued the long tradition of English social realism and literary satire in much of her work and has placed these more conventional modes alongside the avant-garde. The point is that Spark only ever engages with these various literary modes in so far as they can be subsumed by her essentially singular vision. It is, perhaps, for this reason that she has not been taken up by many women critics even though her fiction, for example, might be related to the 'feminist primitivism' of Fay Weldon or the profound engagement with religion and ethics in the work of Iris Murdoch.<sup>9</sup> But it is clear that Spark's quirky and playful voice refuses to be contained by any one doctrine. Her abiding doubleness, above all, places a sense of history, tradition and the

avant-garde next to an irreverent and whimsical sense of the absurdity of all human philosophies.

Rather than categorizing her in relation to any one identity or literary culture, I want to stress that Spark's hybrid background – part English, part Scottish, part Protestant, part Jewish – has enabled her to become an essentially diasporic writer with a fluid sense of self: Always shifting in time, from the 1940s to the 1980s, her fiction encompasses Rhodesia, Edinburgh and Jerusalem and rotates, habitually, between London, New York and Rome. No one time, place or culture has been allowed to delimit Spark's imagination. Because of this, her many and varied versions of her own biography have meant that she has adamantly refused to settle on a single account of her formative years. The main problem with her designation as a 'Catholic writer', utilized by most critics of her work, is that it assumes that Spark has a stable and fixed identity and set of values which consistently informs her fiction. Ruth Whittaker, for example, in an influential study, states that all of Spark's fiction is 'written from a Roman Catholic standpoint'.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to this approach, I believe that Spark is constantly in dialogue with herself and, from the beginning, has played imaginatively with her own basic assumptions and the many elements which help to make up her sense of self. In short, there is always a tension between Spark's insistence on her radical singularity as an artist and her contrary insistence on the spiritual transfiguration of such differences. My argument is that her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1954, far from resolving these contradictions, placed them in sustained dialogue.

Given the universalizing rhetoric that shapes the conventional representation of the convert, it is significant that Spark was, from the start, to continually stress her unique individuality in relation to this generalizing and categorizing orthodoxy. This is the subject of her key autobiographical story, 'Come Along, Marjorie' (1958), which is set in a Catholic retreat called Watling Abbey, a version of the Aylesford Carmelite Priory which Spark had attended. As with much of Spark's subsequent fiction, all of the characters in this story are 'recovering from nerves' (CS 163) while the narrator of the story, aptly nicknamed Gloria Deplores-you, is alienated by the conformist demands of her fellow neurotics:

As we walked along with our suitcases I made note that there was little in common between them and me except Catholicism, and then only in a mystical sense, for their religious apprehensions were different from mine. 'Different from' is the form my neurosis takes. I do like the differentiation of things, but it is apt to lead to nerve-racking pursuits. On the other hand, life led on the different-from level is always an adventure. (CS 161–2)

Her companion's neurosis, however, takes the form of 'same as': 'We are all the same, [Jennifer] would assert, infuriating me because I knew that God had made everyone unique' (CS 162). Here, in a nutshell, is the tension in Spark's conversionist orthodoxy. The impersonal and universal higher order, into which the convert is meant to assimilate, threatens to expunge her own singularity. For this reason, an unbounded individualism is at the heart of this story and much of Spark's subsequent fiction. Marjorie Pettigrew's supposedly insane refusal to conform to the norms of the retreat, and the brutal response that results from her refusal, illustrates poignantly the consequences of an authoritarian ordering principle. Instead of this conformism, Spark rewrites Gloria's Catholicism so that it can accommodate individual difference and become part of the maverick arts of the novelist. In opposition to her conventional companions, Gloria responds that: '[Jennifer] believed everyone was "the same", she didn't acknowledge the difference of things, what right had she to possess curiosity? My case was different' (CS 170). The curiosity of the artist clearly cannot exist without a strong belief in 'the difference of things', however supposedly stable and unambiguous her identity as a Catholic writer.

The 'difference of things' structures Spark's fiction in two main ways. First of all, it provides her with a range of possible national or religious identities – Scottish or English, Catholic or Jewish, European or cosmopolitan – that she plays with throughout her work. But it also allows her to differentiate within all of these categories and, at her most provisional, to deny the efficacy of all forms of classification. Spark's abiding scepticism, and refusal to settle on any one way of seeing the world, is a direct result of her 'different-from' adventurousness. Her sense of duality, of being both an insider and an outsider, feeds into her earliest poetry and short stories. For instance, in

'The Ballad of the Fanfarlo', first collected in *The Fanfarlo and Other Verse* (1952), Spark introduces the figure of Samuel Cramer who is taken from Baudelaire's story 'La Fanfarlo' (1848). Cramer is described, after Baudelaire, as 'the contradictory offspring of a pale German father and a brown Chilean mother', which is used as the epigraph to the poem. He is the first of Spark's uncategorizable anti-heroes and it is significant that he reappears in her seminal story 'The Seraph and the Zambesi'. In the story, Cramer has 'the look of north and south, light hair with canvas-coloured skin' but he is also, in less flattering terms, a 'half poet, half journalist' (CS 86). Most of Spark's subsequent protagonists or writers manqués are not dissimilar hybrid figures who, for good or ill, are firmly outside social conventions.

What is interesting about Cramer is that his hybridity is both liberating and unhealthy and illustrates Spark's fears about the confusion inherent in the 'differentiation of things'. In the story, Cramer's romanticism and doubleness result in an artistic ego which is unbounded and out of control and, because of this, he mistakes fiction for reality like many of her ensuing mythomaniacs. The point of the poem, more successfully rendered into prose, is to contrast Cramer's bogus version of reality with the real thing. In the poem, Cramer ends up in No-Man's Sanatorium, a place which signifies both his sickness and the dangers of unbelonging. When, in the story, an actual Seraph appears in his nativity masque, Cramer, lacking a dimension outside of himself, fails to recognize it. His solipsism is the limit of his world and so he becomes unreal. As Karl Malkoff notes, Spark needs to give form to Cramer's romantic no-man's-land as 'without strict controls based outside the individual, art disintegrates, life becomes meaningless'.<sup>11</sup> Much of Spark's fiction is torn between the neo-classical desire to contain reality within fixed artistic forms and a romantic individualism which is essentially disorderly and defiant. In the story, she stresses a neo-classical view of art as indicated by the 'outline' of the Seraph which, in stark contrast to Cramer, 'lacked the signs of confusion and ferment which are commonly the signs of living things, and this was also the principle of its beauty' (CS 90).

Spark is never quite sure whether the quest for order, as in her own conversion, is not itself a form of crazed unreality as it expunges an all too human 'confusion and ferment' from the

world. In another key story, 'You Should Have Seen the Mess' (1958), her deranged protagonist acts as if she can turn the messiness of life into a neatly ordered narrative. In the orthodox language of the convert, she behaves as if dislocation and displacement can be easily tidied away. While Spark's life before her conversion is essentially displaced and out of control, it is in danger of becoming reduced to a neatly ordered narrative in her fiction. It is in these authoritarian terms that Spark has been pigeonholed as one of a number of neo-classical 'Catholic novelists of detachment, like Joyce, whose god-like writer is indifferent to creation, paring his fingernails'.<sup>12</sup> Her often cool aesthetic surface and authorial indifference, coupled with her supposed commitment to a God-given truth, has resulted in critics stressing the sly aloofness of works such as *Memento Mori* (1959). But Spark has always been aware of the dangers of coldly expunging an uncontrollable emotional life from her fiction. At the same time as using an omniscient narrative voice, her novels also question the values of clarity and order, which is the reason why, immediately after *Memento Mori*, she published the anarchic and amoral *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

In her story 'Bang-Bang You're Dead' (1961), her heroine, Sybil, asks, 'am I a woman...or an intellectual monster?' (CS 85), to indicate the limitations of her commanding voice. Sybil's parodic childhood game, where she is constantly shot, only to 'resurrect herself' (CS 63), also demonstrates an enduring playfulness towards her most sacredly held beliefs. Spark's critics have tended to underestimate the extent to which her conversion not only unified a fragmented self but also enabled her to occupy more than one space in her fiction. Her faith in a universal higher authority, in other words, is thrown into disarray by a fictional practice which is plural and partial and embraces a multiple sense of self. Here the Joycean analogy is worth returning to. The Catholic authorial model, embodied in Stephen Dedalus, of the writer indifferent to creation, 'paring his fingernails', is countered in *Ulysses* (1922) by the figure of Leopold Bloom. The Greek-Jewish Bloom, in this novel, represents ambivalence *in extremis*; the impossibility of imposing meaning on the world, however much his god-like author might wish to. The ordering of reality in Spark's playful fiction is similarly provisional and always open to question. That which she wishes to transfigure invariably



proves to be uncontainable and returns to haunt her.

In many of her short stories and novels, beginning with 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' (1957), characters are so radically divided that they are transformed into apparitions which haunt the page. The girl 'left behind' embraces her own dead body 'like a lover' (CS 360) and, in a parody of spiritual renewal, lays to rest the ghostly narrator. Her stories are preoccupied with aged or dead writers who complete their novels from the grave, or are such overwhelming spectres that they inspire others to finish their life-work. At the end of 'The House of the Famous Poet' (1967), Spark's narrator decides that the 'angels of the Resurrection will invoke the dead man' and that her worldly role as storyteller will eventually 'restore the fallen house of the famous poet' (CS 218). Here redemption takes both a religious and secular form and Spark was well aware of the different trajectories within these distinct kinds of exchange. Sandy Stranger, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, is inspired to write by her conversion to Catholicism and thus enables her readers, famously, to 'transfigure' Miss Brodie. The self-transfiguration of Nicholas Farrington in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), on the other hand, is the endpoint of his poetic engagement with the May of Teck Club. His posthumous sceptical scrutiny, outside the sphere of words, is of a markedly different order.

Far from being transfigured, Spark's life-story seems to return obsessively in a fictionalized form. Conversion, in these terms, is invariably ambivalent as it not only opens up the possibilities of transforming experience through writing but also exposes the limitations of such parodic mutations. Madness, singularity and unrestrained emotion are the stuff that Spark simply cannot convert into an untroubled and impersonal narrative. One of the key reasons why she is so sceptical toward the act of conversion is that she wishes, above all else, to challenge the Calvinistic belief in predestination by insisting that her personae have as open a future as possible. In her short story 'The Fortune-Teller' (1985), Spark distinguishes crucially between having a 'destiny' and a 'destination' (CS 335). Once her life-story is thought of as a foregone conclusion, determined by a single redemptive destiny, then other potential destinations are of necessity excluded and diminished. This determinism, which Michael André Bernstein has called 'foreshadowing', is precisely what

Spark's fictional practice works against.<sup>13</sup> Spark therefore not only embraces her cultural difference but also redoubles it so that it does not have a single destiny.

Spark's doubleness with regard to her Scottishness, for instance, can be seen in her telling essay 'What Images Return' (1970), which initially associates her birth place with a sense of restriction which she had to escape. In her autobiography she recalls that, as a teenager, she 'longed to leave Edinburgh and see the world' (CV 116), which was why she decided to get engaged to Sydney Oswald Spark at the age of 19 when he was about to travel to Rhodesia. This alienation from Edinburgh is reinforced in 'What Images Return', where the city of her birth has 'bred within me the conditions of exile', which 'has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling' (WIR 151). Spark is explicit in the essay about defining herself in opposition to the 'Caledonian Society aspect of Edinburgh which cannot accommodate me': 'The only sons and daughters of Edinburgh with whom I can find common understanding are exiles like myself' (WIR 152). For this reason, she describes herself as 'an exile in heart and mind' and as someone who is 'moving from exile into exile' (WIR 151-2). Her feelings of exile are connected directly with her inability to assimilate into a puritanical Scottishness but also to a more creative sense of not belonging to any one nation.

At the same time as being alienated by her Scottishness, Spark in 'What Images Return' also indicates her strong attachment to the 'haughty and remote anarchism' (WIR 153) of Edinburgh, in contrast to the inclusiveness of Rome, and elsewhere regards herself as a writer of 'Scottish formation'. Appropriately enough, she thinks of her father, born in Edinburgh, as being akin to the Castle Rock or the 'great primitive black crag' (WIR 153), which belongs to the heart of the city and is also strangely incongruous. Like her father, Spark is both part of and out of place, even in her home town. Scottishness, in these primitive terms, 'has definitely had an effect on my mind, my prose style and my ways of thought'.<sup>14</sup> In *Curriculum Vitae* she especially singles out the border ballad tradition of Scottish writing which the young Muriel Camberg 'memorized... without my noticing': 'The steel and bite of the ballads entered my bloodstream, never to depart' (CV 98).

It is significant that Spark chooses this gothic tradition, to accompany a range of other adopted literary sub-genres – such as the desert island adventure, the urban pastoral, the school-girl's story, the ghost story, the detective novel, or the political allegory – to represent one aspect of her primitive Scottishness. In so far as the conventions of the border ballads collapse the distinction between the natural and supernatural, they chime with the gothic elements in many of her novels and are most explicitly invoked in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *Territorial Rights* (1979) and *Symposium* (1990). Scottishness, in these terms, is associated with both the narrow Calvinism of Edinburgh and the gothic sensationalism of the border ballads, as well as with the sense of inevitability inherent in both traditions. But she also challenges all forms of predestination with reference to the maverick 'nevertheless principle' of her native city where a 'statement of an unmitigated fact' is invariably preceded by 'nevertheless' (WIR 153).

Spark's part-Jewishness is also redoubled and contradictory and is associated equally with the confusion and ambivalence of her unconverted self and with the radical individualism valued in her 'different-from' Catholicism. At the start of 'My Conversion', Spark characterizes the 'very peculiar environment' (MC 58) of her childhood which she states is 'difficult to locate': 'I am partly of Jewish origin, so my environment had a kind of Jewish tinge but without any formal instruction' (MC 58). Later on, she speaks of the 'very indefinite location' (MC 59) of her childhood as opposed to the clarity of her Catholic identity which enabled her to find 'one's own individual point of view' (MC 61). As with T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), which Spark had reviewed favourably, Christianity is seen as a means of imposing distinct boundaries on an excessively fluid and rootless identity.<sup>15</sup> Her part-Jewishness, along with her abiding sense of alienation and ill-health, was thus initially a negative principle to set against the sanity and clarity of Christian culture. In this, and especially in her neo-classical poetry of the 1950s, Spark was particularly influenced by Eliot to the extent that she was writing a book on him at the time of her conversion (CV 202). His overpowering presence can be found as late as *Reality and Dreams* (1996), although this novel does manage to achieve an ironic distance from him.

In stark contrast to her neo-classical sense of Jewishness as a negative principle, Spark is also at pains to expose the simple-mindedness of all ordering narratives in much the same way as Joyce in *Ulysses* used the uncategorizable Greek-Jewish Bloom to undermine the received language of religion and nation. It is in the context of Spark's abiding difference as a 'Gentile Jewess' that she is able to challenge, in her fiction, the redemptive promise of conversion. She, pointedly, does not describe herself as a 'Christian Jew' or 'Jewish Christian' which would have reinforced a traditional Catholic view of the transcendent power of the founders of the Church. Instead, the term 'Gentile' is deliberately open and suggests both a non-Jewish pagan and a rather prim and comic Edinburgh gentility. Throughout its composition, *The Mandelbaum Gate* was called 'The Gentile Jewesses' although, in the end, only a short story emerged with this title. Spark insists that 'The Gentile Jewesses' (1963), another tale which echoes throughout her work, is a 'nearly factual' account of her visits to her maternal grandmother in Watford (CV 81). She thus repeats much of this story in her autobiography. But whereas *Curriculum Vitae* tries to be 'factual' by assuming the air of non-figurative documentary realism, 'The Gentile Jewesses' is a story about telling stories and is playfully self-conscious about its claims to authenticity. Spark is acutely aware in her story of the extent to which identity needs to be performed and cannot be fixed by an outside or paternal authority.

In 'The Gentile Jewesses', Spark is able to embrace her part-Jewishness in contrast to the strictures of religious orthodoxy. After recollecting her grandmother's shop in Watford, the Sparkian story-teller comments that the 'scene is as clear as memory to me' (CS 308), which gives a flavour of the enticing ambiguities in the story. The clarity of Spark's memories are, after all, precisely what is open to question. Her earlier preoccupation with Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1914–22), which culminated in her essay 'The Religion of an Agnostic' (1953), meant that she was well aware of the easy claim of 'authenticity' for 'my remembrance of things past' (CS 300). Told from the fictionalized viewpoint of the granddaughter, the first-person narrator stresses throughout that this is just 'one telling of the story' (CS 308) and that her memories have been changed and

modified with constant retellings. What is more, the granddaughter often re-enacts, in retrospect, the stories told to her by her grandmother. After recalling a visit by a group of spiritualists, she 'took my grandmother's hand to show me what spiritualists did' (CS 311). Much of the story is performed in hindsight as if Spark is deliberately going through the stages necessary to construct a singular history. The grandmother's description of herself as a 'Gentile Jewess' is, in this way, enacted by Spark's mother and, eventually, by Spark herself. The narrative thus holds in tension the fixity of myth-making with the provisionality of story-telling.

Throughout the story, in fact, Spark's authorial voice stresses the extreme arbitrariness of her 'Gentile Jewish' identity. When told that she did not 'look like a Jew', Spark pointed to her small feet and claimed that 'all Jews have little feet' (CS 313). At another time, referring to her father's profession, she notes mischievously that 'all Jews were engineers' (CS 313). Her grandmother, on the other hand, dismissed as 'Pollacks' (CS 313) a group of Polish-Jewish immigrants to Watford while embracing some Londoners of German descent as honorary Jews. That Spark was to constantly play with her part-Jewish identity in her childhood can also be seen in *Curriculum Vitae*. Born Muriel Camberg, her 'foreign' name often attracted comment: 'When asked about my name I said it was a Jewish name, evidently of German origin' (CV 107). On her return to an Anglican convent in Bulawayo to refuse a job, because the Mother Superior was so rabidly anti-Semitic, Spark responded by saying that, 'Of course, I'm a Jew', even though, she remembers, her 'fair skin' and 'golden locks' might indicate otherwise (CV 134-5).

Rather than perceiving a sense of confusion that needed to be resolved, her narrative voice locates her 'Gentile Jewish' identity as a creatively disruptive force. Much to the chagrin of her grandfather, her grandmother was an active Suffragette who participated in women's marches down Watford High Street. As Spark was to illustrate at length in *Robinson* (1958) and *The Takeover* (1976), a distinctly feminine spirituality enables her heroines to challenge patriarchal authority of all kinds. Her mother's pagan ritual of bowing to the moon three times – a ritual which Spark still continues 'for fun' (CV 38) – is also

perhaps related to the Judaic lunar calendar. By the end, her mother yokes together Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism, and this all-embracing pluralism becomes the key version of women's spirituality in the story. At the same time, 'The Gentile Jewesses' ends rather abruptly with the Spark-figure turning Catholic as 'with Roman Catholics too, it all boils down to the Almighty in the end' (CS 315). This limiting point of closure contrasts starkly with her childhood home where 'all the gods are served' (CS 315). The unresolved tension between the freedom inherent in a displaced multiple identity and the rather blunt transfiguring power of the Catholic Church was to be addressed at length in *The Mandelbaum Gate*.

'The Gentile Jewesses' is one of a number of her early stories that embrace the fluidity and disruptiveness of individual differences as opposed to the authority and sameness of more orthodox social and religious structures. At one point in this story Spark's narrator describes her grandmother as a 'white negress' (CS 309) and she wears, symbolically, a 'white apron' over a 'black apron' (CS 308), which is a binary image-pattern that is repeated in most of Spark's novels. Many of her stories set in Africa concern what she calls 'the great difficulties of mixed marriages' (CV 135), and 'The Black Madonna', for instance, concerns a white couple who give birth to a black baby because of a long-forgotten relative. The latter story is one of many examples of the return of the repressed in Spark's writing which, significantly given her own background, can often take a racialized form.

In a recent story, 'The Young Man who Discovered the Secret of Life' (1999), Muriel Spark's all-knowing and opinionated narrator argues that 'the lives of people hold many secrets... There was possibly no one "secret" applying to us all' (YMD 1-2). For Spark's storyteller, the 'secret of life' is the 'quenching' of the particular 'ghost' which had hitherto haunted her protagonist and had been 'thirsty for his soul' (YMD 4). Rather than a single all-explaining 'secret of life', Spark points to the 'many secrets' which make up her characters' lives and generate their own individual ghosts. The tension between a transcendent explanation of the 'secret of life' and the manifold 'secrets' of her past lives can be said to define her enigmatic artistry.

Spark is, above all, a singular paradox. Her literary influences