

## **‘You Should Have Seen the Mess’: Muriel Spark and the Problems of Biography**

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Spark’s short story ‘You Should Have Seen the Mess’ (1958) features a first-person narrator who appears to be in the throes of a personality disorder. The irony of this disorder is that it is manifested in neurotic attempts to impose an order where it does not belong. The narrator, Lorna, quite simply cannot make sense of what she sees as the chaos in which others choose to live their lives: the disorderliness, the want of cleanliness, and the lack of pattern in everyday behaviour. The dark humour of the story comes from her inability to empathise: to understand the very human reasons why her friend Dr Darby might shout in frustration at his young child, for example; or to mistake a ‘charming’ fourteenth-century cottage for a slum and blithely recommend to the old lady who lives there that she apply to the council to be re-housed. As is rather characteristic in Spark, this thematic humour is reinforced by formal irony: this is a story in which a narrator obsessed with order and cleanliness signally fails to be able to create a clean, coherent narration. In spite of her professions at facility in English (belied by her grammatical errors) and her self-consciousness about her role as expositor, what Lorna gives us is a narrative in name only. It remains to the reader to give a shape to what she or he has read; to supply an ordering story to what is otherwise a disordered, episodic plot.

Such conflicts between order and disorder – along with the difficulties of getting one’s life story straight – occur frequently in Spark’s writing. Lorna’s inability to read the patterns of other lives, to draw lines of significance from what seems a tangled mess of social relationships is an everyday problem – successful relationships plainly depend on individuals understanding and predicting the thoughts and actions of others. But it is also pre-eminently the writer’s problem: how to construct in a sequence of words a plausible simulacrum of the social world and its inhabitants in a way that recognises and respects its complexity while rendering it coherently. A concern with such issues, in both their philosophical and technical aspects, is fundamental to Spark’s writing. One of the principle questions that hangs over her work – related to the philosophical ‘problem of other minds’ and to her interrogation of the founding premise of liberal humanism that individuals are the authors of their own experience – concerns how much we can ever truly know of what is going on in the inner lives of others. The other, technical, issue concerns the process of expressing such speculative knowledge in language: in her fiction Spark not only insists on the difficulty involved in knowing others, but also of the effective falsity of attempting to put such knowledge into written form. Her characters are never in any simple sense knowable, for she frequently raises troubling questions not only of how far they can ever know each other, but of how far we as readers can ever satisfactorily understand them. This is doubly difficult when the issue becomes a textual one: when characters either try to write about other characters or verbalise their thoughts about them, or when the author reminds us that what we’re reading is, after all, only a text and not a record of actual lived experience.

The difficulties that Spark's characters experience in coming to terms with one another might then be described as the difficulties of the biographer – the problems of first discerning another's attitudes and experiences and then of inducing a plausibly coherent, explicatory life story from them. These difficulties are experienced in their most explicit form by Spark's artist figures: those who pursue writing or other forms of representation as a career and who, in Spark's world, are rarely to be trusted. The novelist Charmian Piper, in *Memento Mori*, is one such. Alec Warner is mistrustful of the easy way she can glibly reduce his own experiences to a simple plotted account, believing that 'her novelist's mind by sheer habit still gave to those disjointed happenings a shape which he could not accept, and in a way which he thought dishonest'.<sup>1</sup> Warner's view of Charmian is that she falsifies her account of his life by narrativising it: by insisting on reading pattern and significance into what have in fact been mostly random events and then in constructing an account of them that serves her own interests: 'she saw the facts as a dramatic sequence reaching its fingers into all his life's work. This interested him so far as it reflected Charmian, though not at all so far as it affected himself.'<sup>2</sup> When Charmian herself acknowledges that 'the art of fiction is very like the practice of deception' we are not, then, particularly surprised; just as we are not surprised when another of Spark's novelists Fleur Talbot, in *Loitering with Intent*, tells us that 'complete frankness is not a quality that favours art'.<sup>3</sup> Reading such novels we are frequently reminded, as Bryan Cheyette puts it, that 'fiction, for Spark, is always essentially a distortion, a true lie that arbitrarily fixes meaning.'<sup>4</sup>

Similar difficulties attend other Spark characters who attempt to use their writing as a means to understand others. January Marlow in *Robinson* writes potted life-histories of Robinson and Jimmie Waterford in her journal, in the hope that if she grasps their life stories she will gain a kind of intellectual purchase on them. But, perhaps typically for Spark, Marlow fails to do this in any satisfactory way, never fully understanding Jimmie's oddness nor Robinson's initial opacity and then his final perversity in faking his own death. Not long before Robinson disappears, Marlow is baffled by his irregular habits and irrational cultivation of the island, remarking to herself that 'if you choose the sort of life which has no conventional pattern you have to try to make an art of it, or it is a mess.'<sup>5</sup> The irony is that all this time he has, unknown to her, been artfully preparing to become the author of his own apparent death. The novel's wider irony (and perhaps the reason why it is one of the less-loved of Spark's books) is that in spite of its gestures towards closure in its final pages, the narrative leaves the reader only partly satisfied by the explanations given for the behaviours of its characters. January Marlow's continuing concern for her own privacy – she refuses to sell her story to the newspapers and remains opaque to the reader – becomes a token of the book's wider acknowledgement of the fundamental unknowability of others, a rejection of the order of art for the messiness of life. In the end she perhaps comes to speak for the reader (as well as to remind us of her namesake's similarly unfathomable encounter with Captain Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of*

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 187. Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (London: Bodley Head, 1981), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), 32-3.

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Spark, *Robinson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 84.

*Darkness*) when she says of her fellow survivors, that ‘their familiar characteristics struck me merely as a number of indications that I knew nothing about them’.<sup>6</sup>

Similar frustrations attend Jane Wright in *The Girls of Slender Means* as she attempts to write a biographical feature article on Nicholas Farrington, a poet and Catholic convert lately martyred as a missionary in Haiti. Jane has in the past been an accomplished forger, attempting to put herself into the mind of others by imitating the marks they leave on the surface of events, but for all her arts of impersonation, she is – as we find in the course of the novel – unable to get to the heart of the mysteries of Farrington’s personality. She is faced only with the deep inscrutability of other people. And although Spark’s narrator offers us a little more additional information about the possible causes of Farrington’s conversion, in the form of his unexpressed and unrequited attraction to Joanna Childe, a note in a manuscript by him in which states that ‘a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good’, and his witnessing of a murder during the celebrations of VJ day, we finish the novel little more enlightened about the reasons for the change of direction that will eventually lead to his death.<sup>7</sup> He is a figure of contrary impulses, who attempts to impose, in ‘a poetic image that teased his mind’, his own mistaken construction upon the women of the May of Teck club.<sup>8</sup> As such he is the most prominent of the many misreaders in this novel: the individuals who interpret their fellows narrowly according to their own personal needs, and who together form a tragi-comic world of misrecognition and, ultimately of mutual indifference.

Biography – in its loosest sense of the attempt to make a persuasive life story for an individual out of one’s observations of them – seems, then, to be something of an impossible art in Spark’s fiction. The problems of truly knowing others in a disinterested way, and of being able to render such knowledge satisfactorily in language seem insurmountable. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that her novels contain many characters who might be said to be wilfully resistant to biography. Caroline Rose’s attempts to escape the narrative that attempts to write her in *The Comforters* might be read in this way, as might Sandy Stranger’s resistance to the life-narrative that Jean Brodie plots for her and the other members of the Brodie set. Elsa in *The Hothouse by the East River*, is another, slightly more unusual, instance, who refuses to submit to the limitations of her real life-story and instead continues a posthumous counterfactual existence: Paul saying of her ‘she’s a development of an idea, that’s all. She’s not my original conception any more. She took on a life of her own. She’s grotesque.’<sup>9</sup> Lord Lucan similarly seems to enjoy not one but two posthumous lives in *Aiding and Abetting* in an attempt to evade the limitations and closure of conventional biography. Lise in *The Driver’s Seat* is another figure who tries to overcome the world’s defining narratives in unusual fashion, in this case by pre-empting them in authoring the events of her own death.

The reason such characters might want to resist the attempts of others to define their identities in terms of their life stories is perhaps highlighted by the rich cast of blackmailers that inhabit Spark’s novels. Tom Wells in *Robinson*, Joe Ramdez in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Mabel Pettigrew in *Memento Mori*, Hector Bartlett in *A Far Cry from*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>7</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 140.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>9</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Hothouse by the East River* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 129.

*Kensington*, Robert Walker in *Aiding and Abetting* all use biographical knowledge for financial leverage. To know the intimate secrets of another life in Spark's fiction is not to own it exactly, but rather to take out a potentially lucrative lease on it.

This sceptical approach to the possibility of knowing others, and the anxiety over the uses to which that knowledge might be put, is perhaps unsurprising given Spark's religious beliefs. The attempt to exercise authorship over the life of another might be regarded as rather presumptuous to one who acknowledges the presence in the world of a higher-level Author. But this hesitation is perhaps a little more surprising when it is noted how much of Spark's early career was taken up with the activities of literary criticism and biography to which such presumptions were, at least at that time, fundamental. For, in the seven years before the publication of her first novel *The Comforters* in 1957, Spark's major published output was as author or editor of eight anthologies and critical biographies which dealt variously with William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, John Masefield, the Brontës, and Cardinal Newman. Spark's major emphasis in approaching this rather diverse group of writers was emphatically biographical: two, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1951) and *John Masefield* (1953), were relatively straightforward full-length critical biographies; one, *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work* (1953), co-written with Derek Stanford, was a critical biography to which Stanford supplied the criticism while Spark contributed a one-hundred page biography. The other books, three of them co-edited with Stanford, were *Tribute to Wordsworth: A Miscellany of Opinion for the Centenary of the Poet's Death* (1950), *Selected Poems of Emily Brontë* (1952), *The Brontë Letters* (1954), and *Letters of John Henry Newman: A Selection* (1957), to each of which Spark again contributed introductory biographical essays.

Spark's literary criticism in these works is, as one might expect, both insightful and technically-informed, as can be seen, for example in her analysis of the language of *Frankenstein* or the discussion of the 'tragic error' in Masefield's *Dauber*. But her approach to biography in these books is rarely as cautious or self-reflexive as that of her later fiction. Her work on Masefield, for instance, is, in her own words, an attempt 'to discover the vision in the man and the man in the vision' and involves reading parts of Masefield's poetry as a form of personal revelation.<sup>10</sup> She is concerned, primarily with Masefield's achievements as a narrative, rather than lyric poet, and is attentive to the ways in which he transforms personal experience into art, but her reading tends to come back, for validation and authority, to the life-experiences and the 'inspiration' from which it came.<sup>11</sup> Much of the book is a detailed, technical reading of Masefield's long narrative poems, with (in an emphasis that is particularly relevant to Spark's own fictional technique) particular attention being paid to the way in which Masefield achieves his effects by the patient accumulation of closely-observed details. For Spark, it is Masefield's rootedness in his own experience and his personal simplicity that give his work its clarity and power, an impression reinforced by his autobiographical writings, which 'never fail to give the impression that life has always presented itself to him, as it

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<sup>10</sup> Muriel Spark, *John Masefield* (London: Peter Nevill, 1953), 26.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the discussion of the relationship between Masefield and his protagonist, Saul Kane, in *The Everlasting Mercy*. *Ibid.*, 96.

were in the narrative form.’<sup>12</sup> The insistence throughout the book is that of conventional biography, assuming both the transparency of its subject and the teleology of his life story. When Spark discusses the books Masefield read in his youth, for example, she describes them as ‘unpieced parts of a mosaic, which later was to take shape in his mind’.<sup>13</sup> We get little sense here of a life that might have taken any number of turnings according to chance or circumstance. Instead we have an assumption that somehow all of Masefield’s early experiences lead ineluctably to his eventual triumph: each experience a building block in the formation of a mind destined for greatness, not part of an undifferentiated mess out of which worldly success somehow emerges.

Similar assumptions underpin her treatments of other writers. If the subjects of her critical biography have anything in common, it is that they are intriguing personalities who exist in tension with the organising forces that surround and threaten to destabilise them. Wordsworth is defined by his relations with the circle of females that orbit him; Emily Brontë by a tight-knit family group dominated by her elder sister Charlotte; Masefield by the conventions of a conservative literary practice against which his narrative poetry strains; Newman by the machinations of the Roman Catholic Church to which he converts; and Mary Shelley by the overshadowing presences firstly of her parents and then her husband and half-sister. Such tensions are the common stuff of biography, but what arguably unites her subjects is Spark’s fascination with the personal, human qualities that each salvages from that experience and transforms into art. Spark asserts, in her introduction to *The Brontë Letters*, that ‘where outstanding figures of literature are concerned, surely the greatest benefit to be derived from a study of their lives is that which penetrates the operation of the creative mind, interpreting the spirit which motivated it’.<sup>14</sup> This approach finds expression in the view of Newman as ‘a great man’ whose ‘personality was involved in all his undertakings’, who ‘approached practically everything from a personal point of view’.<sup>15</sup> It can be found in her assertion that ‘more than is the case with most poets, Wordsworth the man and the poet are interdependent’, and in her belief that the best of Emily Brontë’s poems are ‘a personal projection of the author’s spiritual life-force’.<sup>16</sup>

This is never quite as simplistic as it may sound. Spark’s interest in biography is focused mainly on those aspects of the life experience that inform the writing directly and which, in her view, become objectivised in the artwork itself. She seems duly mindful in this regard of T. S. Eliot’s arguments about literary impersonality as well as the work of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>14</sup> Muriel Spark (ed.), *The Brontë Letters* (London: Peter Nevill, 1954), 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘My Conversion’, in Joseph Hynes, *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 24. Derek Stanford and Muriel Spark (eds.), *Letters of John Henry Newman: A Selection* (London: Peter Owen, 1957), 143 & 58.

<sup>16</sup> Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford (eds.), *Tribute to Wordsworth: A Miscellany of Opinion for the Centenary of the Poet’s Death* (London: Wingate, 1950), 129. Muriel Spark, *The Essence of the Brontës: A Compilation with Essays* (London: Peter Owen, 1993), 9.

contemporary theorists, such as Father Agius, that derive from them.<sup>17</sup> And Spark is always aware, too, that the personalities of her subjects are rarely as straightforward and consistent as they might be. Although she rather downplays this in the case of Masfield (her only living subject), she is alert to the difficulties and self-contradictions of her other subjects. She writes apropos of Mary Shelley, for example, that ‘all people contain within them the elements of conflict. In some, however, the battle wages more vigorously, more unequally and longer than in others, and such people eventually reveal a salient inconsistency to the world; Mary Shelley was one of these.’<sup>18</sup> Cardinal Newman, likewise, proves by example that ‘some temperaments are only true when they are inconsistent.’<sup>19</sup> This idea has its most sustained examination in Spark’s long biographical essay in *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*. Here she tries to come to terms with the contradictory biographical readings of Brontë: on the one hand the timid “”problem” girl” who appears in contemporary comments and in her sister’s Charlotte’s account; on the other the ‘impassioned superwoman’ manifested in her novels and emphasised in the ‘legend’ that emerges in later biography.<sup>20</sup> Spark acknowledges the self-contradictions involved, and resolves them partly, as she would again in the case of Newman, by talking in terms of the ‘development’ of a changing personality. But she also offers a more surprising and subtle reading that perhaps undermines the assumptions underlying much of her biographical writing. In attempting to come to terms with the disparities in accounts of Brontë’s life, Spark ponders whether we should pay more attention to the immediate facts of a life or to the accumulated interpretations placed on those facts by subsequent accounts. ‘Which is the more accurate portrayal,’ she asks, ‘that of the real man whom we chanced to meet, or that of our reconstruction – the legendary figure, in other words?’ The surprising answer to this question is that ‘the second impression is the more real. The first merely prefigured the legend.’ Spark is careful to add that a mixture of the two is the best of all, that ‘we need concrete as well as legendary impressions to bring us somewhere near a true picture of the man’, but the welcome acknowledgment here is that biographical objectivity is difficult, if not effectively impossible – that life-writing is an inherently unstable practice. This kind of admission is as rare in her biographical writing as it is abundant in her fiction.<sup>21</sup>

While Spark’s biographical writing is rarely as self-reflexive as her fiction in these terms, her biographies do introduce several preoccupations that are worth noting for the way they recur in her fiction. Perhaps the most salient of these concerns the creative individual’s need for independence. One thing that unites her biographical subjects is their need to escape the restraints of convention, family and religion in order to develop their individual voices. Newman’s struggle was to assert his personality against the dogmas of the Catholic Church to which he had converted. This created

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<sup>17</sup> She had as editor of *Poetry Review* published Agius’s ‘The Psychology of Poetry’ in 1947. See Valerie Shaw, ‘Fun and Games with Life-stories’, in Alan Bold (ed.), *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (London: Vision, 1984), 59-60.

<sup>18</sup> Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (London: Constable, 1988), 232.

<sup>19</sup> Stanford and Spark (eds.), *Letters of John Henry Newman: A Selection*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford, *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work* (London: Peter Owen, 1953), 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

misunderstanding and rejection, but also led to personal growth, 'almost as if the endurance of personal misunderstanding were a condition of his development'.<sup>22</sup> The Brontës are likewise fortunate to have evaded another kind of smothering orthodoxy. As Spark tells it, 'there is every possibility that had their mother lived she would have humanized them to the extent of reducing their creative powers; while their personal sufferings might have been mitigated, their genius might in some measure have been muffled by her love'. This is particularly fortunate as, in Spark's view, *Wuthering Heights* 'could never have been the product of an orthodox mind'.<sup>23</sup> The cases of Mary Shelley and William Wordsworth are less salutary. Shelley can never escape the snares of the world, and finds her imaginative powers declining 'as her passion for "status" mounted'.<sup>24</sup> This is also adduced as the reason for Wordsworth's decline, which Spark (writing jointly with Stanford) attributes directly to his marriage. Wordsworth at the height of his powers is 'the rebel, the heretic, the "half-atheist"', but when he marries and finds himself 'adapting to the demands of orthodox opinion' his work is fatally weakened. He is, in this view, an individual who 'seemed to require some profound emotional disturbance before the universe appeared to him in vital and imaginative terms', with the consequence that 'a low-voltage domestic feeling for his wife outwardly stabilised the man but inwardly assassinated the poet'.<sup>25</sup>

As is apparent in these arguments, it is possible to see in Spark's biographical readings an early manifestation of several of the preoccupations of her later fiction. The assertion of an inverse relationship between orthodoxy and creativity found in the biographical writing, for example, can be seen to foreshadow the scepticism towards religious institutions exhibited by many of her fictional protagonists, usually expressed in their attempts to maintain a semi-detached relationship to religious orthodoxy. A similar case can be made about the common attitudes in her biographies and fiction towards the responsibilities of the individual in their personal and familial relationships. Where she is concerned with family life at all in her fiction, it is usually only to show how stifling and restrictive it is, and how ungrateful children are to their parents. And just as she rarely plays happy families in her novels, she is rather short on happy marriages. From her first novel, *The Comforters*, in which the wedding of Caroline and Laurence is endlessly deferred to the disintegrating marriage of Nina and Rowland in her last, *The Finishing School*, Spark's fiction is overwhelmingly populated by a cast of dissatisfied husbands and wives, and single women in flight from unsatisfactory relationships. In this world marriage is commonly a condition of limitation that involves either the erosion of self or the grounds for a powerful mutual resentment – seen most nakedly, perhaps in Frederick Cristopher's vicious jealousy of his wife in *The Public Image*.

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<sup>22</sup> Stanford and Spark (eds.), *Letters of John Henry Newman: A Selection*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Spark (ed.), *The Brontë Letters*, 16 & 21.

<sup>24</sup> Muriel Spark, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Hadleigh: Tower Bridge, 1951), 6. Spark softened this argument in the revised edition, suggesting there that she had been beguiled by the prevailing and over-simplistic view that 'after the death of Shelley she [Mary] gradually craved more and more for bourgeois respectability'. Spark, *Mary Shelley*, x.

<sup>25</sup> 'Wordsworth the Person', Spark and Stanford (eds.), *Tribute to Wordsworth*, 15-16.

It is abundantly clear from her novels that Spark is a highly self-reflexive, sophisticated author who understands, and indeed exploits, the many paradoxes of life writing. Strange, then, that she appears to resist these paradoxes when it comes to dealing with narratives of her own life. As even a casual reader of Spark quickly understands, and as her autobiography readily testifies, there is often a great deal of her own experience lying at the roots of her fiction. Peter Kemp has noted, for example, how in *Robinson*, Spark allows 'barely transmuted bits of personal material [to] break jarringly through the fictive covering'.<sup>26</sup> And it is clear that there is more than a little of Spark in the character of Fleur Talbot, the first-person narrator of *Loitering with Intent*. This is a novel in which Fleur becomes entangled in the machinations of the 'Autobiographical Association' for whose members she invents life stories that are more racy and more credible than the real thing. She is at the same time working on her first novel, *Warrender Chase*, and in typical Spark fashion (and perhaps as a reminder of Spark's own first novel *The Comforters*) it begins to appear that the people around Fleur are acting in ways that are pre-determined by her fiction. The novel is, in other words, an entertaining and complex treatment of the themes of identity and the operation of free will often found in Spark's work as well as being a characteristic Sparkian metafictional experiment. This sense that the novel is engaged in a series of complex autobiographical games is further enhanced by the elements of direct personal experience that Spark chooses to place in the work. For example, the reader's first encounter with Fleur is in 1950 as she sits writing a poem in a Kensington graveyard. By the time the novel was written it was already public knowledge, thanks to Derek Stanford's critical biography as well as poems such as her 'Elegy in a Kensington Churchyard', that this is the kind of situation in which Spark might typically have been found at this time.<sup>27</sup> And this is only the first of several direct parallels that can be made between the life experiences and tastes of the writer-heroine and her author. Both are, in 1950, quirky, independent-minded women existing, as Fleur puts it, 'on the grubby edge of the literary world': both slightly *fast* poets manqué, with an ear open for the felicitous eccentric phrase and an abiding passion for the autobiographies of Newman and Benvenuto Cellini. So when Fleur tells us that 'I've come to learn for myself how little one needs in the art of writing, to convey the lot, and how a lot of words, on the other hand, can convey so little', it is difficult not to hear a self-description of Spark's own fastidious approach to prose writing.<sup>28</sup> And this closeness in tone is reinforced at the novel's close, with Fleur's account of her early life ending with the phrase that would also close Spark's autobiography: both resolving to 'go on my way rejoicing'.<sup>29</sup>

It would be reductive to suggest that Fleur is simply a thinly-veiled portrait of Muriel Spark, but it would be equally simplistic to say that she is definitively not Muriel Spark. She is, rather, a kind of composite textual being in whom fundamental questions

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), 37.

<sup>27</sup> See Derek Stanford, *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1963), 52.

<sup>28</sup> Spark, *Loitering with Intent*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> See *Ibid.*, 222 and Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: Autobiography* (London: Constable, 1992), 213.



about the stability of fictional and ontological identity contend. In her characterisation Spark teases the reader into a game of recognition and misrecognition. She invites us to recognise the seemingly real people behind her characters, and persuades us by her observational sharpness and sensitivity to the niceties of social behaviour that what we are witnessing are rich, thickly-cut slices of life. But by constantly foregrounding the constructedness and self-consciousness of her narratives she is also reminding us of the opposite case: that her scenarios are textual rather than actual, and that her characters are not autonomous beings who precede the text but are rather individuals who have come into being within it. That is to say, they owe their being to their author and to the context in which that author has chosen to place them— an ontological status that has both literary and religious ramifications.

*Loitering with Intent*, like many of Spark's novels, playfully explores and exploits such issues of autonomy and identity. It does this both within the boundaries of its own world – in the manipulations of personal identity which its characters are subjected to and with which they largely collude – and also within the wider literary world that surrounds it: the world in which the novel is consumed and which is aware of the persona (or, as in Spark's discussion of Emily *Brontë*, 'the legend') of the author who controls and informs it. One of the several points that comes out of these playful, sophisticated textual games is that the writing of a life story is not so much an act of discovery as an opportunity for creativity and reinvention; less an attempt to fix a simple truth in lines of type and more an opportunity to work up some words in ways that might, in all their contingency and partial adequacy, come close to resembling at least a little of the complexity, inscrutability, and self-contradiction of individual experience. Fleur Talbot confides in the reader that,

Since the story of my own life is just as much constituted of the secrets of my craft as it is of other events, I might as well remark here that to make a character ring true it needs must be in some way contradictory, somewhere a paradox.<sup>30</sup>

What is particularly interesting here is not just the opinion – often expressed, as we have seen, in Spark's fiction and in her biographies – of the irreducible complexity of personal identity, but rather the self-reflexiveness of the first clause. In acknowledging that the story of Fleur's life is 'just as much constituted of the secrets of my craft as it is of other events', Spark is stating concisely the fundamental difficulty of arriving at an authoritative biographical narrative, and, perhaps, pointing to the ultimate irreconcilability of the two parts of the phrase 'life writing'.

One might expect, then, that her approach to the writing of her own life might show such a reflexive, playful awareness of slippery textuality the issues of autonomy and authorship, and the pluralities of personhood. But when she becomes in her turn a biographical and autobiographical subject Spark's tone becomes much less ludic and sophisticated. It is on record that she disapproved of Derek Stanford's *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study* (1963), which is perhaps understandable given that their once close working relationship had ended some six years previously (with Spark subsequently pillorying him as Hector Bartlett, the mendacious '*pisseur de copie*' in *A*

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<sup>30</sup> Spark, *Loitering with Intent*, 41.

*Far Cry from Kensington*, and removing his name as the dedicatee of her biography of Mary Shelley in its second edition). Spark wrote to one early critic of her work, Dorothea Walker, that in ‘the interests of accuracy’ Walker should be mindful that ‘a number of biographical pieces already written about me are altogether wrong, sometimes pure inventions, which I am sure you would not wish to perpetuate. Especially don’t copy Derek Stanford.’<sup>31</sup> This concern with ‘accuracy’ and with setting the record straight is professedly a part of the motivation for the writing of her own autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, and is arguably what makes it a less interesting and less insightful book than it might otherwise have been. In her introduction Spark talks again of the ‘strange and erroneous accounts of parts of my life that have been written since I became well known’, and states that the book contains ‘nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses’.<sup>32</sup> This is admirable for the purposes of consistency and factual scholarship, but it ignores exactly the complex issues that animate her fiction. In mapping meticulously the real events of her life, and in relating them to their transfiguration in her fiction (as well as settling a few old scores along the way), Spark creates a persuasively clear and amusing account of her younger self but denies that self the rich variousness, the openness to self-contradiction and the enabling sense of paradox that she customarily allows her fictional characters. She renounces, in other words, the messiness of life as it is lived for the clear certainties of the documentary word, constituting herself author and official keeper of her own life: a position that her fiction-writing self – the witty, paradox-loving creator of Caroline Rose, Jean Brodie, and the Abbess Alexandra among many others – would surely have mocked for its impossible presumption. And she continues to will this authority over her life’s story from the grave. In the 1990s Spark relented in her resistance to becoming a biographical subject and approved the writing of a biography by Martin Stannard. When it became clear, however, that Stannard intended to take an independent line Spark stalled on its publication, reportedly having ‘to spend a lot of time going through it, line by line’ in the attempt to ‘make it a little bit fairer’, and ultimately wishing ‘she had not got involved with the project in the first place’.<sup>33</sup> According to press reports, this process of obstruction in the name of clarification has continued, with her estate insisting on ‘substantial revisions’ before the work might be authorised for publication.<sup>34</sup> The result is that the biography has, in 2008 and long after its completion, still not appeared.

In the letter to Dorothea Walker quoted above, Spark suggested that her long-held unwillingness to divulge biographical details was partly natural reticence, partly a concern for the feelings of others who might be implicated, ‘but also because I believe my work can be judged on its own’. In the light of her early excursions into biography and in the wake of the indiscretions of *Curriculum Vitae* (not to mention her apparent absence of concern for the feelings of the widow of Lord Lucan in bringing him back to

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Dorothea Walker, *Muriel Spark* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 105.

<sup>32</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> A. S. Byatt, quoted by Tim Walker, ‘Companion puts hold on “unfair” Spark biography’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 April 2007, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Control your reputation from beyond the grave’, *Evening Standard*, 24 April 2007, p. 1. See also Gareth Rose, ‘Friend of Spark halts biography’, *Scotland on Sunday*, 22 April 2007, p. 6.

life in *Aiding and Abetting*) this seems disingenuous. Spark's work can, no doubt, be enjoyed and understood in the absence of knowledge of its author. But hers is an oeuvre which is so deeply concerned with issues of identity and authority, and so closely identified with the persona of its author, that to attempt to understand it without taking Spark herself into account is to miss a rich, perhaps the most rich, element of its intriguing, playful complexity.