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RE-INVENTING REALITY: PATTERNS AND CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS
OF MURIEL SPARK

City University of New York

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RE-INVENTING REALITY: PATTERNS AND CHARACTERS IN THE
NOVELS OF MURIEL SPARK

by

MICKEY PEARLMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in English in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York.

1987

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Langston Hughes had a good question. He asked: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore...Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?"

Dreams can be energizing but they are sometimes burdens and enervating ones at that. The doctorate, of which this dissertation is the final symbol, has been a twenty-year dream for me. At times it has represented possibility, satisfaction, achievement, and in other moments--struggle, fatigue, and the impossible. But it was, somehow, always there--festering like the "sore" that Hughes describes and refusing to "crust and sugar over--like a syrupy sweet."

And because of four people the dream is now on the precarious verge of reality. To them I wish to acknowledge my unpayable debts and to express a gratitude and affection which transcends suitable expression:

Marvin Magalaner, mentor, professor, friend, by treating me as his peer encouraged me to be more and to know more than I thought possible. Only someone who has labored to satisfy the standards of a scholar of excellence knows the joy and the struggle which that effort entails.

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My daughter, Mia, who thinks I am as sexy as Cher and as smart as Gloria Steinem (or vice-versa?) held me to the standard of an illustrious role model. Because she insisted that I was smarter, finer and more capable than I could ever believe myself to be, she became and remains the reason not to fail. She brewed the coffee, she endured the moods, she ate more Blimpie's sandwiches than any eleven-year old should be required to digest, and she did it all with the special, mercurial wit and intelligence that is her unique gift.

My son, Ted, as the lyrics say, "wrote the song." With his musician's instinct for the appropriate, he, from the earliest days, named me "Dr. Mom," and applauded my often frantic efforts to be mother, teacher, baseball fanatic and student simultaneously and often ineffectively. He made this struggle easier by not failing to reach for his own dreams, often with very little help from me.

There are other dreamtenders here to be acknowledged; too many, as the cliché goes, to be named, but a few at least who boosted egos, watched out for children, kept the faith and showed up with kindness and care before I could ask them to give it: Sanda Cohen, Deena Stutman, Bill Glaser, Br. Jerry Markert, Al Indelicato.

I wish also to thank the student and professional librarians at Iona College and finally to thank and acknowledge my long-time symbol of happiness and excellence, of dreams completed, not deferred, my much-loved alma mater, The City College of New York, where it all started.

Mickey Pearlman

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Muriel Spark is a Catholic novelist whose moral view of the world has been most often analyzed by the critics. But the seventeen novels which she has produced from 1957 to 1984 are dominated by characters who seem to be uniquely and recognizably Sparkian: their actions and reactions have an absurd, even disjointed quality that reflect the world which surrounds them. Spark's characters are bizarre, unpredictable, memorable and they dominate the novels. It is the characters which the reader remembers, not the plots. As Samuel Hynes has observed, Spark

is not, like that other distinguished convert [to Catholicism] Graham Greene, devil-ridden; the diabolic creatures who turn up in her books are more grotesque than terrifying, and their deeds are rather annoying than destroying. They are eccentrics, liars, meddlers, and bores -- the kind of people who bring out the pettiness and uncharitableness in us, not the kind who lead us to damnation.¹

In The Contemporary English Novel Frederick Karl complains that her books "are so involved with the eccentric event and the odd personality that they have virtually no content...She can write about murder, betrayal, deception and adultery as though these were the norms of a crazy-quilt society."² In a rejoinder to this, called "The Deceptions of Muriel Spark," Irving Malin says that "Mr. Karl apparently

believes that novels should have... 'normal' characters. He does not see that the 'eccentric event' and the 'odd personality' are deliberately chosen for... artistic ends."³

Malin is correct in this judgment because Spark's characters and the patterns which contain them are her most significant contribution.

In a fascinating article entitled "The Pleasures of Rereading," Spark commented at length on the importance of characters to the success of a book. She said that

...there are two works I do reread continually, neither of them belonging to English literature. When I want to relax and get into a thoughtful mood, invariably I take down a volume of Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu, any volume, any page. The magic works, sinuous as a snake. Normally what would one care about an old degenerate like Charlus, or Swann with his airs, or the Duchesse de Guermantes in her self-satisfied felicity? But Proust makes these people matter through the sheer force of his style, his extraordinary time manipulations.⁴

Spark says that

the other book I reread with unflinching pleasure is the Bible, especially the Old Testament. [It contains]...so much poetry, so many literary forms, such wonderful stories. And from a novelist's point of view, what clearly delineated characters. (my emphasis) God himself with His attitudes of I did this and I made that, His 'thou shalt perish' and 'I repent, thou shalt survive and prosper' intrigues, thunderbolts, smiles--a character so true and yet so contradictory. He basks unashamed in His own glory, and in His anger He is positively blasphemous. Few works

of world literature contain so many great, wild and precise characters as the Old and New testaments.⁵

And she adds that "students of creative writing should study them."⁶

Various critics have attempted to label Muriel Spark a Catholic apologist, feminist, comedic writer and satirist, Derek Stanford, who published a biographical and critical study of her work in 1963, calls her a moralist.⁷ Spark has probably been labeled so variously because what she does with the novel is, in fact, so difficult to define. "She has that evident pleasure in the manipulation of her medium which distinguishes the master novelists from the journeymen"⁸ but the "focus of each book [and its] significance...is usually obscure [and] enigmatic."⁹ The consensus of critical opinion is that she is "original"¹⁰ and that each novel presents "a new set of fictional problems [and] a new kind of plot-invention."¹¹ Susan Cahill says that Spark is sometimes called "a mere miniaturist,"¹² and Karl Malkoff insists that "her apparently glib novels comprise a serious attempt to probe the dark moral heart of man."¹³ John Updike believes that Muriel Spark is "one of the few writers of the language on either side of the Atlantic with enough resources, daring and stamina to be altering, as well as feeding, the fiction machine."¹⁴ And Muriel Spark says that her job as writer is to create characters who allow us to see ourselves.

In an interview with Philip Toynbee in 1971, twenty years after she began to publish, Spark said that "as writers our job is to bring about an environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppression of our time."¹⁵ She accomplishes these goals

exactly, particularly in her ability to render "a sense of the absurd," through her characters. We can speculate that what she means by "the ridiculous oppression of our time" is a world full of antiquated rules and reckless rulebreakers, of enervated spirituality and an exacerbated sense of the inexplicable.

What can we learn, then, by observing the collections of emotionally scattered and fragmented types who are often found, in Spark novels, in small, homogeneous groups. There are bachelors lumped together in one novel, old people in another, "sets" of school-children, nuns, and girls of slender means. They often co-exist without any real interaction, populating the same world without any real, visceral involvement. Their relationships are superficial. That is, their lives intersect without interweaving.

Because Spark creates these seemingly homogeneous groups, the reader expects even more singularity of spirit, more cohesiveness. What the reader finds is that bachelors, for example, have in common their unmarried state but little else. As John Updike says, in The Bachelors he counted "ten bachelors, and, on the female side, three maidens, two widows and one divorceé...in the space of a work little more than two hundred pages long all these persons are set in motion and made not merely distinct from one another but individually memorable..."¹⁶

These characters, in my view, reflect the world which Spark has increasingly portrayed in her novels--lands of disconnected spirits unsupported by, or uninvolved with, the tenets of religion, nationalism or family--the traditional landmarks of reality. One should not imply that Spark herself does not recognize these social institutions as

viable. But, as she has said, "in some of the contemporary novels I'm not too keen on, the narrator is always the author...that gets monotonous. Every theme demands a different sort of commentator, a different intellectual attitude. In order to achieve that, you have to write the narrative from a consistent point of view that's not your own."¹⁷ And so her characters in many cases are like many of her readers; the traditional institutions have ceased to be useful for them as stabilizers. Muriel Spark's religion may be the philosophical base of her personal vision, but it is not the sustaining virtue of her work. Rather, what is worth examining is the technique which she uses to create characters, through distinct and traceable patterns.

There are both major and minor patterns in the work of Spark. Some patterns are associated with people and their work (servants, writers, artists). Others are associated with conflicts (social reversals, identity). Spark also creates patterns which involve social milieux (disordered gardens, negative space).

Some of Spark's patterns are pervasive: for instance, the use of names with suggestive or symbolic content which permeates all her books, or the repetitive use of certain objects, (e.g., the telephone), which are significant in many of the stories. (see Memento Mori and Slender Means) Symbolic names and objects appear in novels which, thematically, are about identity, language, reality.

The patterns will be analyzed in this dissertation in five separate chapters:

Characters and Motifs

- I. the pervasive patterns
 - a. names (suggestive)
 - b. symbols (reversed)

Sexuality

- I. a Sparkian statement about reality
 - a. misfits
 - b. bisexuals and homosexuals

Repeated Lines (Litany) and Repeated Ideas

- I. a Sparkian statement about language
 - a. repeated phrases
 - (example: "Remember you must die", Memento Mori)
 - b. objects as symbols

Contrariety

- I. a Sparkian statement about expectation
 - a. reversals
 - 1. servants and masters
 - b. characters with doubles
 - c. space (imprisoning)

Creativity

- I. a Sparkian statement about identity
 - a. writers and artists

Each of her seventeen novels depends on at least one of these constructs or patterns. What is, perhaps, more important, is that a given pattern, for instance, the artist/writer/creator character, appears in thirteen of the seventeen novels. In addition, a given

novel can, and often does, depend on five or six of the patterns. In The Comforters, for instance, Spark uses symbolic names, creates a main character who is a writer (Caroline Rose), includes a dominating servant who controls the action (Georgina Hogg), connects a character (Caroline Rose) to an object (a typewriter), and introduces a minor character who is a male homosexual (Ernest).

It is important to note that Spark's work has not been previously examined in this way since most of the existing criticism focuses on Spark as convert, Catholic and moralist. However, one could make the point (and I intend to) that it is Spark's characters and her fictional technique of creating patterns, which she then repeats and reemphasizes throughout her work, which are her lasting contribution to literature.

Spark's career began in the late 1950s, a time of conservatism in America and Britain with pockets of angry young men raging against the social order on both sides of the Atlantic. Her most famous novels, Memento Mori (1959), The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961) and The Girls of Slender Means (1963) were produced in or around the 1960s, a time when the "modernists (or postmodernists)...[were] in favor of stretching the genre"¹⁸ and were withdrawing "from traditional narrative and character development."¹⁹ American authors like Pynchon and Gaddis were "cutting through standard narrative devices, establishing different principles of observation."²⁰ Spark lived for a good part of this decade in New York and wrote The Hothouse by the East River there. America in the 60s was a kaleidoscope of beads and bayonets, a time of dropping out, tuning in, "turning on." The airwaves and the streets were filled with politics and protests,

militants and marches, flag burners, flag wavers and feminists. It was a time of reflection, reaction and change. Reality, or at least the status quo, was being re-examined and the streets were full of Muriel Spark characters. In the 1960s, the "self" was "mirrored, remirrored, refracted, fragmented, reconstituted,"²¹ and the boundaries of conventional sexuality were realigned or ignored.

Spark satirizes the climate wonderfully in Hothouse:

'Haven't we got enough serious problems in this city? We already have the youth problem, the racist problem, the distribution problem, the political problem, the economic problem, the crime problem, the matrimonial problem, the ecological problem, the divorce problem, the domiciliary problem, the consumer problem, the birth-rate problem, the middle-age problem, the health problem, the sex problem, the incarceration problem, the educational problem, the fiscal problem, the unemployment problem, the psychodynamics problem, the homosexual problem, the traffic problem, the heterosexual problem, the obesity problem, the garbage problem, the gyno-emancipation problem, the rent-controls problem, the identity problem, the bi-sexual problem, the uxoricidal problem, the superannuation problem, the alcoholics problem, the capital gains problem, the anthroegalitarian problem, the tri-sexual problem, the drug problem, the civic culture and entertainments problem which is something else again...'²²

The novels which Spark produced in the 1970s, The Driver's Seat (1970), Not to Disturb (1971), The Hothouse by the East River (1973), The Abbess of Crewe (1974) and Territorial Rights (1979), are all

short, lean novels. An exception is The Takeover (1973) which is long, wordy and convoluted. To some degree they are minimalistic. "Echoes, mirrors, images based on reflection and doubling became like a 'second voice' in the novels of minimalism. If echoing is the means, revelations are the end, irony the middle ground. The irony may be muted, but it must exist..."²³ These novels reflect Karl's statement that "with minimalist fiction...the writer must assure the audience that he, the writer, knows far more about the subject than he is including; that beyond him, [sic] in some spatial realm, there is the rest, undefined perhaps, but there."²⁴ This kind of fiction "is nearly always based on a pessimistic view of life, where all the normal goals or controls no longer obtain. It depends heavily on irony, itself a form of negation."²⁵

Her 1980s novels, Loitering with Intent (1982) and The Only Problem (1984) deal with the issue of creativity (the pattern here is one of writers and artists, to be discussed in Chapter VI) and the Christian and Catholic allusions disappear. Both of these books are, in a sense, Spark's version of what transpired in literature in the 1970s: the problem of determining "what, if anything, reality is; where it lies, what shape it takes; where, if anything, it is heading."²⁶ It is not unusual for any novelist who is dealing with "the only problem," the eternal problem of deciding "what, if anything, reality is," to emphasize the writer/creator character. Spark has done so in Loitering and The Only Problem because artists and writers are central characters in her discussions of identity and the larger overriding theme of reality and appearance. These artists

are her listeners and, like Wallace Stevens' "...listener, who listens
in the snow,

and, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

"The Snow Man"

Spark also uses minor patterns which are, in a sense, somewhat superficial; they are word games, inside jokes, puns and puzzles. One is hard pressed, for example, to analyze why at least seven of her major female characters are named after flowers (Freda Flower, Fleur, Poppy, Rose Stanley and even Elsie Forrest) or why, in this same context, several of the novels contain sinister gardens with reversed imagery. We can assume that most readers associate gardens with the positive aspects of Eden and its paradisiacal qualities of calmness, peace and joy. Accompanying this are the suggestions of fruitfulness and innocence. But Eden was also the setting of the fall of man, the site of man's first disobedience. The irony is that in the most perfect environment (the garden) lay mankind's potential for expulsion, pain and punishment. As Northrop Frye has noted, "this world has disappeared, and with the 'fall' of Adam and Eve man descended into the indifferent and alien nature that we see around us now..."²⁷

Eve's apple is not unlike the unexploded bomb in the garden of The Girls of Slender Means or the decomposed and butchered body in the garden in Territorial Rights. Spark's gardens are repositories of potential or past evil, surrounded by beauty.

What is undeniable is that there is a pattern here of beautiful but mysterious places rife with buried symbols of evil. There is

always a snake in the garden of Muriel Spark. There is always a twist, a turn of the emotional screw, a reminder of our fallibility and our inability to exert complete control over a fluctuating, absurd and often incomprehensible reality. Spark herself says that "...we have come to a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd. And I think that even the simplest, the least sophisticated and uneducated mind is aware of this fact."²⁸ Most critics, however, see the metaphorical snakes, the unexploded bombs, the mysterious phone calls as urgent memos from a deity insulted by our ignorance of Him and our insistence on ignoring what we do not understand. The religious interpretations of Spark's work trace the sense of absurdity and disorder in her novels to our falling away from a Christian context. In other words, there is no grace without a state of grace and there is no state of grace without God.

In a discussion of The Girls of Slender Means, for instance, George Greene says that this novel "admits the impossibility of explaining in strictly rational, human terms most of those discrepancies which the 'vigilant manipulator' allows. Against the hard core of self-seeking in the incantations of persons like Selina, sometimes God must sustain contact with His world by resorting to delaying tactics, like a guerrilla commander who faces far larger concentrations of power."²⁹

I intend to concentrate on Spark's contradictory and contrapuntal people--scheming nuns, fascistic schoolteachers, minor terrorists and phoney Barons with manufactured identities. They are always a contradiction of our assumptions--reversals--and they are Spark's way of playing with our expectations. We expect nuns to be pious and not

cunning, schoolteachers to be intelligent but not manipulative, and aristocrats to be genuine, not artificial. Spark does not.

One of her techniques is to combine her pattern of reversal with her predilection for symbolic names. In Memento Mori, for example, the character who finally emerges as central is Jean Taylor, the maid of Charmian Piper, an eighty-year old former writer of successful romance novels. The novel ends with the note that "Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidingly upon Death, the first of the four last things to be ever remembered."³⁰ Taylor believes that the phone calls reminding all the characters to "remember you must die," come from Death himself, a kind of modern allegorical superstar. What is interesting, in terms of the patterns, is that the name Charmian is that of a pert, charming servant girl who attends Cleopatra and who "rises under the stress of the death of her Queen to tragic dignity."³¹ Shakespeare's Charmian "tends Cleopatra's body, closes her eyes, delivers a touching eulogy, and then joins her mistress in death."³² She is, in fact, the wise and worthy servant, as is Jean Taylor. But in this novel it is the mistress who bears the maid's name, without her attendant qualities. Charmian Piper is mercurial, charming and self-centered, like the original Cleopatra. The maid in this novel (Jean Taylor) assumes the position of leadership (she masters the situation) and has qualities of devotion and wisdom similar to those of the original Charmian.

The reader expects to understand an author's characters through the actions described in the text or through an understanding of the social milieux in which these characters are placed. But Spark upsets

this expectation: her characters usually suggest disorder, reversal, and the sense of dislocation is strong. They are often sexually mal-adjusted; they are often either victims or victimizers. The patterns, therefore, become even more significant because they suggest that Spark has continued to struggle with the same questions over the twenty-five year span of her career. Part of the unexpected in Spark's work emanates from a feeling of disruption, of being both rootless and uprooted and of the suffering which consequently ensues. Spark describes herself as "a constitutional exile"³³ and she says that "it was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exiledom; and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile into exile? It has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling."³⁴

In her latest novel, The Only Problem, her Job-like hero questions the necessity for suffering. In many ways he is himself an innocent victim of the terrorist mentality, not the punishment of God. In her first novel, The Comforters (an allusion to the Hebrews surrounding Job), the characters victimize each other and themselves. There are no viable comforters in either book.

Another pattern which underscores Spark's thesis is that of confused sexuality. Her novels are littered with characters whose sexual proclivities are often bizarre, but in the context of a Spark novel, that very quality seems precisely apt. The sexual confusion simply reinforces the general sense of absurdity. In The Comforters (1957) she creates Ernest (the name suggests seriousness) who is a dilettante, an almost foppish homosexual manqué. The main character in the second novel, Robinson (1958) is described several times as "not [a] man for the ladies." (29) He is non-sexual, isolated even from his own

sexuality. Memento Mori (1959) has Godfrey Colston, an octogenarian voyeur, and The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960) depends on V. R. Druce, a sadist and a murderer. Ronald Bridges in The Bachelors (1961) is both epileptic and asexual and Matthew Finch, in the same novel, eats onions to discourage the attention of female admirers to whom he is, in fact, sexually attracted. Nicholas Farrington in The Girls of Slender Means (1963) is bisexual and finally chooses a celibate life as a priest. Lise in The Driver's Seat (1970) is involved with a Yin and Yang cultist whose characterization is epitomized by this speech:

I haven't had my daily orgasm. It's an essential part of this particular variation of the diet, didn't I tell you? Many other macrobatc variations have it as an essential part. (94)

Lise is, herself, violently anti-sex. Not to Disturb (1971) has both bisexual and homosexual characters and Pierre, in The Hothouse by the East River (1973), is a homosexual actor. Fleur's lover in Loitering with Intent (1981) is apparently bisexual, since he leaves both Fleur and his wife for a male lover. The Only Problem (1984) contains a character named Nathan Fox (the name suggests a cunning nature) who is ambivalent sexually and seems most attracted to the roles of nursemaid and housekeeper. Harvey Gotham, the central character, who impregnates his wife's sister, also adopts his wife's child by her lover. For Gotham, sex is an afterthought; Sex is something that happens to him. Clearly, in the novels of Muriel Spark, one can postulate that this kind of sexual confusion is not accidental and that it is symbolic of a general sense of chaos.

But sexuality alone (confused or otherwise), does not define reality for Spark. There is also the problem of identity, which extends beyond sexuality, and in Spark this is linked to creativity.

Consequently, it is logical that so many of Spark's characters are writers and artists, actors and psychics, the people who traditionally struggle with the questions of illusion, of what seems to be, and what is. This archetypal artist/writer character is in many cases the figure who contributes most to the sense of generalized confusion in Spark's world. Critics like Bernard Harrison report that "readers feel that they 'know where they are' with Jane Austen, whereas with Muriel Spark they don't." (243) That is because in Jane Austen's world, the reader enjoys the expected; in Spark's the reader endures the unexpected.

The writer/artist figure underscores this preoccupation with a changing reality and a disordered world. Samuel Hynes has correctly pointed out that for Spark

the world of human experience is complex, and not ultimately explicable; evil, her demons reminds us, is as actual as nasty servants and telephone calls, and reality is odder than you think.³⁴

Writers appear in The Comforters (Caroline Rose), Robinson (January Marlowe), Memento Mori (Charmian Colston, Alec Warner, Guy Mannering), Loitering with Intent (Fleur Talbot), Slender Means (Jane Wright, Nicholas Farrington), The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (Sandy Stranger), The Public Image (Frederick Christopher), The Only Problem (Harvey Gotham) and elsewhere. Actors appear in The Public Image (Annabel

Christopher), The Hothouse by the East River (Pierre) and in The Only Problem (Edward Jansen).

In spite of these artist characters and the thematic patterns in Spark's work, there is a long list of critics who insist that Ms. Spark's fiction should be examined as an outgrowth of her religious conviction. Ruth Whittaker's The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark is the most recent exponent of this view. Whittaker says that "the Catholic novelist is always (my emphasis) concerned with "eternal damnation, [and, when] realism is practiced, it is used as a foil against which the authorial revelation of the divine action will shine more brightly."³⁶ According to Whittaker, "this revelation obsesses Ms. Spark...

the emphasis of humanist novelists is on the relationship of the individual with the eternal world, rather than with God. This entails a different perspective, since, unlike the Catholic, they usually feel it necessary to present their case from scratch, to build up a coherent, autonomous world with which to convince their reader. The Catholic novelist, on the other hand, proceeds from a given set of precepts which are not usually spelled out in the novel itself. The difference stems directly from what seems to be a Catholic disdain for phenomena (except as symbolic of, or as a manifestation of God's design) and a Protestant respect for the substantial things of this world.³⁷

It is interesting to wonder how Whittaker arrived at the dichotomy between "Catholic disdain for phenomena [and] Protestant respect for... things"³⁸ since Muriel Spark has said that one of the things which interested her particularly about the Church was its acceptance of

matter.³⁹ "So much of our world," she says, "rejects it. We're not happy with things. We want machines to handle them."⁴⁰

To categorize Spark's work so narrowly is to suggest that her novels consist of little more than battlegrounds for the God figure and the devil figure to fight it out while providing the hero with that moment of grace during which he or she chooses good over evil. This approach trivializes Spark's work. A truer assessment is that Spark's "pleasure [is] in intricately patterned plots, and...in the concealment of motive and meanings."⁴¹

Spark discussed her conversion in an interview with Twentieth Century in 1961, and tried then to measure the extent to which her religion dominates her thoughts.

I'm quite sure that my conversion gave me something to work on as a satirist. The Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart. It's not a fluctuating thing...The Catholic Church for me is just a formal declaration of what I believe in any case. It's something to measure from. But I never think of myself as a Catholic when I'm writing because it's so difficult to think of myself as anything else. It's all instinctive.⁴²

In this same interview Spark reacted to the suggestion that religiously "committed" writers are dominated by the tenets of that religion by saying that she did not

feel committed that way. It may be that I am one of those people who are in chains and don't know it. People who don't know say it's like Soviet Russia, as if we get directions from priests and from the Pope telling us how to write. What nonsense.⁴³

In any case, as George Greene has observed, Spark's is "a God who encourages spontaneity more than ceremonial dignity and whose most sovereign power seems to stem from an urge to keep human beings in a state of surprise."⁴⁴

John Updike, on the other hand, is much more relaxed about Spark's Catholicism. He says that she "carries on that traditional English diffidence with which English converts to Catholicism seem to regard the church of their choice."⁴⁵ For instance, Ernest in The Comforters remarks (and this is typical of Spark's Catholics) that "the True Church was awful, though, unfortunately, one couldn't deny, true." (89) Updike says, and I would agree, that his impression is less that the Church has an overpowering case than that the world is too flimsy and foolish to offer much resistance to the leap of faith. Nor is it very heartily suggested that being a Christian improves or comforts one; Mrs. Spark's Catholic characters differ from the others only in having the articles of an ancient creed built into their grid of reflexes, predispositions, and quirks. The possibility of redemption hovers over Sparkland rather bleakly. The people have neither much body nor much soul; they are bundles of nerves.⁴⁶

What seems most important is that, in the years directly preceding her conversion, Ms. Spark realized that she "was ready for a breakdown. I think," she said, that "it was the religious upheaval and the fact I had been trying to write and couldn't manage it."⁴⁷ Another critic has pointed out that "it is likely that any settlement of the uncertainty about her faith would have contributed to her progress as a writer."⁴⁸

Certainly "the matter of being a Catholic is a subject Mrs. Spark has introduced into all her [early] novels, and she has made the Catholic converts important characters in the novels and many of the short stories, most of which raise moral questions of one kind or another."⁴⁹ The great bulk of Spark criticism has concentrated on her inclusion of that convert character and on Spark's "uncomfortable and idiosyncratic"⁵⁰ Catholicism. Since the convert character is usually a woman (Caroline Rose and Georgina Hogg in The Comforters and Charmian Colston and Jean Taylor in Memento Mori, Barbara Vaughn in The Mandelbaum Gate) the critics seem to have focused on this pattern in order to find Muriel Spark's life reflected in her work. (Muriel Spark was born in 1918 of a Jewish father and a Presbyterian mother and in 1954 she converted to Catholicism.) In addition, all of the biographical pages in the Penguin editions of her works contain the sentence, "Mrs. Spark became a Roman Catholic in 1954." (see, for example, The Ballad of Peckham Rye, 1963) Both the critic and the casual reader are therefore programmed to make a connection between the religion and the work of Spark.

One wonders if so much would have been made of her conversion and of these characters had Spark converted to Protestantism or accepted Judaism as her religion, and whether critics would have found a different conversion so significant. The point is that the conversion of these characters is significant only as one aspect of selves who are sparingly drawn. They have very little interior characterization and the motivations for the ensuing actions are negligible where they do exist. We always know something about Spark's characters--details-- (one of which is who converted to Catholicism) but we know very little

about what motivates these characters to act or react as they do. We know that some of the characters become Catholics because Spark includes that information, but there is no overwhelming epiphanous experience which is associated with the conversions. It is simply a fact and it is never presented in an effort by Spark to proselytize for her religion. She remains a writer who is a Roman Catholic, not a Catholic writer.

In her later, more absurd novels, the Catholic convert character disappears. What remains is the "metaphysical component customary in Muriel Spark's fiction"⁵¹ and the "account of the perils that surround our unsuspecting lives."⁵² It is her sensitivity to "these perils" which is my focus here.

Why, then, a dissertation about Muriel Spark? In all the ways in which her work could exemplify a genre, a religious commitment or a social or political position, it does not. She is a female writer, but not, in a noticeable way, a feminist. She was nourished by British literature but her characters usually function outside of a recognizably normal English social order. She is a practicing Catholic but her characters are neither damned or saved by the precepts of a forgiving or a forbidding God. What she has done in her novels is capture the absurdity of experience, which is pervasive and universal. As Karl Malkoff has pointed out, Spark emphasizes "the irrational and the primitive...and refuse[s] to concede that human behavior is entirely accessible to reason..."⁵³ In this way, she is entirely modern; she reflects in a universal context, without national, religious or gender-based overtones, our predicament as contemporary, late twentieth-century readers. Our perimeters are diffused. We have no rational understanding

of correct behavior or reasonable expectation in an absurd and troubled world. The limits are not clear; there are more questions than answers. Our sense of time is affected by an absurdist world view. It ceases to be a serviceable continuum, and with our shaky perception of future, present, past, the concomitant understanding of "self" begins to crumble.

The disintegration of "self" is a continuing motif in the work of Muriel Spark, because, as William Barrett, the philosopher, has noted, "one historical epoch may differ very much from that of another, [but] ...as individual minds we are very much creatures of our time and its particular historical climate [and]...somehow the individual work carries the look of its time about it. It bears all the pressures of its period, however individual and rebellious the artist may have wished to be."⁵⁴ Spark's work too "bears...the pressures of its period, one of which is that "modern mass society, simply by its size and impersonality, tends to absorb and obliterate the individual."⁵⁵ Consequently, "logic," in Spark's view, [fails to] "provide either a basis for moral choice or a way of understanding the universe."⁵⁶

Spark is, in fact, a successful explicator of "...the lukewarm numbness of the modern world..."⁵⁶ and even the critics who interpret her work as "Catholic" report that "the message of her novels [is that] 'people fail you.'"⁵⁸

There is sadness here in the world of Spark. Human relationships are undependable, society is distracted, uninvolved and elusive, time is fragmented and self diminishes. Identity evades us: we invent roles and we become the roles which we have invented, a readership of Gatsbys. Creativity is duplication and duplicity. These are Spark's concerns, and we can trace her involvement with these issues through

her use of specific patterns in the seventeen novels as her unique characters re-invent reality. This is the raison d'etre of this dissertation.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER TWO
CHARACTERS AND MOTIFS

The work of Muriel Spark is in many ways sui generis. She is often compared to Iris Murdoch, to whom she is related by gender and nationality, but the connection is, at best, tenuous. Murdoch writes about mythic patterns and Spark does not. Spark is not in the mainstream of British literature because her characters are not defined or contained by societal structure. Although she was first published in the 1950's during the reign of the Angry Young Men of Britain, she is not, and was not, involved in the clash between the British Establishment and the working classes. Her involvement with questions of class is nebulous although she alludes to the irony of the takeovers of the lower classes and the ineptitude of the aristocracy. It is part of the pattern of reversals. Servants become masters and masters become servants.

Spark may, in fact, have more in common with an American like Flannery O'Connor who deals in the grotesque. The obvious similarities with O'Connor are in gender and religion since they are both Catholics, but the grotesque characterizations are more significant. Gilbert H. Muller, in his book Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque, describes the grotesque character as "one who either exerts himself against the absurd or who is part of the absurd."¹ "This [grotesque] character," he says, "frequently assumes recognizable postures: guilt, obsession, and madness are among his peculiarities,

and at his best he is simultaneously a rebel, rogue, and victim. He can also be prankster, saint, demonist, fanatic, clown, moron, or any combination of these; or at the mundane level the grotesque can be reflected in any absurd family group."²

These kinds of characters, particularly demonists, victims and rogues, dominate Spark's fiction, especially in those novels written after The Public Image (1968). In this sense Spark, too, is a writer of the grotesque; and the primitive, often quixotic actions of her characters further separate her from her British contemporaries. Rebels and rogues, saints and victims, all see life from an oblique angle. They are extra-normal, extra-ordinary; this is the connection between the grotesque quality of so many American characters and the absurd nature of so many of Spark's. Whether such characters appear in the American O'Connor or in Spark, they remain beyond or beneath society. These links depend on characterization within the novel, not on the nationality or religion of the author. This is an important distinction because Muriel Spark has been most frequently compared to Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh who share her British nationality as well as her Catholicism.

Spark has said "that fiction should generally be considered a suspect witness, and if it is not stranger than truth, it ought to be."³ That has not stemmed the usual critical analysis that her "themes are religious, even if they are not always couched in traditionally religious terms"⁴ or that she is "acutely aware not only of the world of man, but also of the world of God and the incongruity between the two."⁵

One of Spark's novels, The Abbess of Crewe, particularly evokes this dichotomy since it is set in a nunnery but is peopled with grotesques and with rogues.

The Abbess of Crewe, (1974) which is subtitled "a modern morality tale," is widely considered to be Spark's spoof of the Watergate scandal that titillated both the United States and much of the western world in the 1970s. Sub-Prioress Alexandra, heir to the chair of Abbess in the convent at Crewe, and her cohorts in manipulation and intrigue, "the Sisters Mildred the Novice Mistress and Walburga the Prioress,"⁶ and the classically inept Winefrede, represent the Nixon faction in Washington. They are "the three black-draped nuns...[who] dance in a ring, light-footed; they skip round one way then turn the other way," (76) echoing the witches of Macbeth. These are the black-robed powers who [want to] be but are opposed by the supporters of Sister Felicity, doyenne of the sewing room, heroine of the "novices," who has "a following among the younger nuns." (29) She is the flower child of the Abbey, pro-lovemaking and anti-electronics, the love and freedom candidate, and, as Walburga says, "this morning the polls put her at forty-two percent according to my intelligence reports." (30)

On this level, the novel, one of Spark's shortest works at 116 pages, is a marvelous satire. The Nixon forces, (Sisters Mildred and Walburga as Erlichmann and Haldemann) are devious, vindictive and self-serving. They eat pate, "cress sandwiches...golden shortbread and... pastel-coloured petits fours" (55) in the parlour while the lesser nuns eat disguised dog food on toast and "...a perfectly nourishing and tasty, although uncommon dish of something unnamed...that something being in fact a cat-food by name of Mew, bought cheaply and in bulk."

(36) The unholy trio, at Alexandra's request, place listening devices in every room and hallway in the convent and they successfully "bug" even the Lombardy poplar trees that line the driveway leading to the Abbey. "The poplars cast their shadows in the autumn afternoon's end, and the shadows lie in regular still file across the pathway like a congregation of prostrate nuns of the Old Order." (1)

Sister Alexandra has an absent, globe-hopping mentor, a deep-throated ("You sound like bronchitis," (22) says the Abbess), turmoil-producing nun named Gertrude; she is Spark's stand-in for Henry Kissinger. She calls from Africa on "the green line" every night to report on her latest intrigue--"reconciling the witch doctors' rituals with a specially adapted rite of the mass...and moving the old missionaries out of that zone into another zone where they are sure to be opposed, probably massacred." (20) The Abbess says

"I don't know why she goes rushing around, spending her time on ecumenical ephemera. It has all been done before. The Arians, the Albigensians, the Jansenists of Port Royal, the English recusants, the Covenanters. So many schisms, annihilations and reconciliations. Finally the lion lies down with the lamb and Gertrude sees that they remain lying down." (20)

Gertrude's special talent is preparing tailormade vendettas for any group against any and all comers. Gertrude loves trouble, and where there is none, she is an expert at creating it. Like the Abbess Alexandra, she is a mythmaker and a specialist in manipulating ideas as well as people.

'Gertrude, my excellent nun, my learned Hun, we have a problem and we don't know what to do with it.'

'A problem you solve,' says Gertrude.

'Gertrude...we're in trouble with Rome...They have written...to enquire how we reconcile our adherence to the ancient Rule, which as you know they find suspect, with...the courses we are giving the nuns in modern electronics, which, as you know, they find suspect.'

'That isn't a problem,' says Gertrude. 'It's a paradox.'

'Have you time for a very short seminar, Gertrude, on how one treats of a paradox?'

'"A paradox you live with," says Gertrude, and hangs up.' (22)

The Democrats are represented here by Sister Felicity who spends most of her time "in bed" with "her lax and leaky Jesuit," (13) Thomas, with whom she finally elopes. There are many romantic meetings in the orchard. Spark likes a good joke, even when it is on Eve. Alexandra notes that "a Jesuit, or any priest for that matter, would be the last man I would myself elect to be laid by. A man who undresses, maybe; but one who unfrocks, no." (17) Felicity has no tapes or transcripts but the intrigue revolves around the theft of her prized silver thimble and love letters from her elaborate sewing box, inlaid with mother-of-pearl--set on "fine tapered legs with castors, standing two and a half feet high." (61) Muriel Spark's genius for comic exaggeration is at its best here. The box has a not-so-secret false bottom lined with

red watered silk for hiding love letters.

These, of course, are scrutinized by Alexandra's henchwomen and stolen by two Jesuit seminarians at the instigation of Mildred and Walburga who sneak in to the convent on two successive nights as part of Alexandra's covert campaign to discredit Felicity.

On another level beyond political satire, this somewhat spare novel is central in a discussion of the patterns in the work of Muriel Spark and for several characters who re-appear in various guises in other novels. The most obvious pattern is of reversal and contrariety, since no one in the Abbess' upper echelon is committed to anything but power and politics. When Alexandra says these are "two of the finest nuns I have ever had the privilege to know," (33) she is speaking of canniness and connivance, not godliness and grace.

Once again, too, Spark has limited herself to a "set," not Jean Brodie's "creme de la creme" or the octogenarians or bachelors in previous novels, but a limited group in an enclosed environment, "a confirmed world [out of] touch with outside reality."⁷

The third noticeable pattern is that the Abbess Alexandra, like Jean Brodie in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Sir Quentin in Loitering with Intent, is an artist figure who has a mania for manipulation, both emotional and tactical. Like Brodie, she is a contradiction, both traditional and anti-traditional, and she is a mythmaker. She retains the offices of Matins and Lauds which require nuns to pray at midnight and again at three a.m. At the same time she worships the electronic god who has given us the tape recorder and the closed-circuit television camera which enable her to create her own version of reality in an editable, splice-taped and erasable form. The novels of Muriel

Spark are littered with electronic effluvia. No one can read more than three novels by Spark without realizing that our current idealization of the transistorized microchip both repels and frightens her. And that it epitomizes the mind-molding and homogenized thinking which Spark deplores. As Mildred explains, "...our electronic arrangements are merely laboratorial equipment for the training of our novices and nuns to meet the challenge of modern times." (14) Spark believes that electronic devices are modern handmaidens in the myth-making process: "We are truly moving in a mythological context. We are the actors; the press and the public are the chorus...the facts of the matter are with us no longer but have returned to God who gave them," (16) and "the more truths and confusions the better." (18) The dissolution of the line of demarkation between myth and history is echoed by the artist figure, January Marlow in Robinson: "I am as near the mark as myth is to history. The apocrypha to the canon."⁸

The Abbess of Crewe is another Spark novel which contains a litany, here the line "Be vigilant, be sober." (15) Unfortunately, most of the Alexandra faction is not vigilant in avoiding evil, but in creating it. Trevor Royle suggests that in The Mandelbaum Gate and The Abbess of Crewe the theme is "the genesis of evil."⁹

They have a willing accomplice in Winefrede, an older version of the plodding, doomed Mary Macgregor in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. She has the "voice of the very stupid, the mind where no dawn breaks." (1) Winefrede is a type of character who appears in other Spark novels to make Spark's point that some characters close to the source of evil are too stupid to recognize it. They are, consequently, willing and unwitting accomplices. As Alexandra says, "Winefrede

come[s] to join them, with her round face in the moonlight, herself a zone of near-darkness knowing only that she has a serviceable place in the Abbey's hierarchy." (35) Helena Manders in The Comforters is another version of the dim-witted character. She employs Georgina Hogg and recommends her to Caroline Rose without ever becoming aware of Hogg's evil nature.

Winefrede's job here is to help with the cover-up of the Abbey scandal created by Felicity's "extraordinary" disclosures to the police. She is the convent "bagwoman," selected for her lack of brainpower to carry money to the seminarian whom she meets in the ladies' room at Selfridge's, a London version of Macy's. Without some sexual playfulness this would not be a Muriel Spark novel, so Winefrede dresses in mufti and the Jesuit dresses as a woman. Winefrede, riding high over her initial triumph in low-level espionage, arranges the next meeting for the men's bathroom at the British Museum. She is dressed in a "dark blue business suit...with a blue and red striped tie, emblematic of some university unidentified even by the Sunday press..." (110) She is promptly arrested as a transvestite. Lady Alexandra, who anticipated the fumbled transaction, already has a signed "confession" from Winefrede which consists of the prayer repeated "at Mass every morning of your life..." (107)

I confess to Almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul, and to all the saints, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. (107)

Of course, Winefrede has not "sinned exceedingly"; she has been used, and the signing of the confession before the fact is reminiscent of the servant takeover in Not to Disturb orchestrated by Lister the butler. There and here, the deviously able, but morally corrupt, are in charge. Spark is talking about evil--those for whom it is an innate talent and those who are trapped by their own innocence. Judy Little is correct in noting that "the convent setting...is not just a cute joke, but an image of political power so protected, so cloistered, that it recognizes no moral center, no criteria for good and evil, no history."¹⁰

The Abbess is fond of quoting the Protestant hero, John Milton, and his statement that "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue," but she has no intrinsic understanding of virtue, cloistered or otherwise. What she understands is power, its frequent cellmate, evil, and the tenuous state of unadulterated reality.

The novel ends with Alexandra sailing off over the "wide sea billows," (116) (the allusion is to Thomas Traherne's Centuries on a mission to answer her superiors in Rome about the controversy at Crewe. The reader's sense is that Alexandra has been victorious in a world which she comprehends and Spark regrets. As the Abbess has so fluidly stated:

"Garble is what we need now, Sisters. We are leaving the sphere of history and are about to enter that of mythology. Mythology is nothing more than history garbled; likewise history is mythology garbled and it is nothing more in all the history of man. Who are we to alter the nature of things? So far as we are concerned, my dear Sisters, to look for the truth of the matter

will be looking for the lost limbs, toes and fingernails of a body blown to pieces in an air crash." (92)

The Bachelors (1960) is another novel that explores the magnetic attraction of mythology in the middle class neighborhoods of London, "...thirty-eight thousand five hundred streets, and seventeen point one bachelors to a street--lying awake, twisting and murmuring, or agitated with their bedfellows, or breathing in deep repose between their sheets, all over London, the metropolitan city."¹¹

There is plenty of "garble" here too, since in this book as Harold Schneider has noted, "she packs her stage with rather a large number of God's most erring children,"¹² mediums, mystics, the users and abusers of the lonely and alone.

The central character is Ronald Bridges who has decided, after unsuccessful drug treatments in a sun-filled American clinic in California for epileptic seizures, that his "vocation" is to be not a Catholic priest but "a first-rate epileptic." (12) Bridges is a graphologist, an assistant curator at a small museum of handwriting where he has been provided with a small room "with [the] understanding that he could there have his fits in peace without anyone fussing along to his aid." (16) He has been called to testify at the trial of Patrick Seton, the chief medium of a seance group, The Wider Infinity, whose inner circle is named the Interior Spiral. Bridges is one of the countless plodding drones in Spark's oeuvre whose life is a study in irony; he is preoccupied with the precise, the analysis of handwriting, but provoked by the uncontrollable which his seizures represent. He is used here as counterpart to Seton who is spiritually out of control (since he is a liar and a potential murderer), but manipulative and

cunning in ways denied to an epileptic with monthly fits. The irony here, as in many Spark novels, is that the potentially evil character is much more powerful and unlimited than the representative of good.

Muriel Spark said in 1970 that she "had the impression...of life being unusual,"¹³ and that sense is nowhere more keenly felt than in this society of charlatans and exploiters who feed off the weaknesses of each other. Every major character in the novel is sick, psychologically or physically, and there is a sense of doom and of emptiness which is pervasive in the work of Spark. Patrick, as Velma Richmond says, "is a good medium...but he is a fraudulent human being,"¹⁴ or as Allan Massie put it, "a fake man but a genuine medium,"¹⁵ who conceives an elaborate scheme to kill his pregnant and diabetic girlfriend, Alice Dawes, by denying her insulin while they are on a mountainside in Austria and thereby to release her spirit from this gross body." (157) He administers her morning insulin shots; she is dependent on him and the shots as Bridges is dependent on his medication and his "wedge of cork which he stuck between his teeth as the first signs [of convulsions] seized him." (16) Patrick is on trial for defrauding Freda Flower, a widow, by forging a letter giving him access to her inheritance. She is, of course, a victim of her dependence on him. Seton's chief prosecutor is Matthew Finch, another bachelor and friend of Bridges who has similarly "misappropriated funds put into his charge by another widow."¹⁶ Alice Dawes also depends on Elsie Forrest who steals Seton's letter from Bridge's apartment in order to get his attention, perhaps his love. She is pitiful and poignant, a waitress who has had sex without any relationships." (26) She too wants to depend on somebody, to be connected as, in an obvious way, do all the seance participants

who listen attentively for messages from the dead. All of this isolation is linked to a man named Bridges.

The images of death and disease are underscored by what Judy Little calls the "pseudo-idyllic garden images in the names of the characters: Elsie Forrest, Mike Garland, Freda Flower, and perhaps Mike Finch and Alice Dawes--a couple of birds who eventually become lovebirds, since they marry."¹⁷ Seton is "the vicious weed."¹⁸

This is a group circumscribed by more than their unmarried state. Ewart Thornton, a schoolteacher and member of The Wider Infinity, puts his "mounds of homework" between himself and any possible relationship. He is a bore who uses those homework papers as symbols of importance and responsibility but he is a trivial person and one of several pseudo-intellectuals in Spark's work who is both annoying and insignificant. Father Socket (notice the name), another fraud and rival psychic, who "translated Horace, recited Shelley, knew the writings of the early Fathers, and studied the Cabbala," (151) is the wintertime purveyor of "a private cinema show [comprising] two films..." "The Truth about Nudism" and "Nature's Way" [with] three girls, who appeared on the stage in person afterwards, ...more or less thrown in with the price of the ticket." (151) The girls are lodged with Freda Flower since "the show would lose its attraction... 'without a peppering of real flesh and blood...we must allow for the cruder tastes of the Many.'" (151)

The Bachelors is a novel about "'a fairly bleak world when all is said and done,'" (44) a place where God is a "vigilant manipulator," where the ingenuous are victims of their naivete, the lonely remain apart, and the sea of human frailty remains unbridged. This is a place where, as Caroline Rose suggests in The Comforters, "...we [are] all

courteous maniacs discreetly making allowances for everyone else's derangement."¹⁹

NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

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¹⁹Muriel Spark, The Comforters (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1957), 43.

CHAPTER THREE
CONTRARIETY AND CONTRADICTION

Confused time, organized disorder and an impression of danger and instability: these are the hallmarks of Not to Disturb, The Hothouse by the East River and The Girls of Slender Means. And there is another powerful device at work in these novels: the motif of enclosed (and often dangerous) space.

Frederick F. Karl, in an essay on Doris Lessing, "The New Anatomy of Melancholy" says that

Since Kafka and Proust, there has developed what we may call a literature of enclosure. It is a type of fiction in which breath of space is of relatively little importance. Space exists not as extension but only as a volume to be enclosed in a room, or a house, or even in a city. Joyce's Dublin has this quality--as though the city were not open to the sky but were a series of enclosures of houses and bars and meeting places. Such a city conveys not the sense of something unfolding, but of something accruing, like an internal growth which invisible expands to tremendous size under cover of the flesh.¹

There are two insights here which are pertinent to Spark. One is that the city becomes a metaphor for the often sick society which has produced it; the second is that the limited, enclosed spaces of rooms, houses and cities serve as dangerous places. In Spark's fiction these enclosures are certainly not the drawing rooms or

societal demarcators of British fiction; they are more reminiscent of the American "House of Usher," the House of the Seven Gables and space as it is used in Dreiser, Anderson and Flannery O'Connor. Indeed, the fictional characters who must function in these spaces are often grotesque and their personalities and actions often replicate the space which contains them. The girls in The Girls of Slender Means have slender bodies ensconced in rooms with slender windows, but they also have pointedly slender morals.

We are aware in Spark's fiction of both aspects of space alluded to in Karl's statement. Characters seem locked in by enclosed space and, at the same time, curiously detached from the societal structure. Society does not imprison them since the societal structure is often so amorously portrayed. (We don't even know, for instance, in The Driver's Seat, which country or city contains the action.) Society does not define the characters as in earlier British fiction but the enervating power of limiting space does. The more Spark's characters are enclosed by limited space, the more their actions take on an absurd quality. As Walter Pater observed:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.²

This is precisely what happens in The Hothouse by the East River.

Here we have a supposedly "real" world located in the upper-class, East side of Manhattan, but more specifically in an overheated apartment, the "Hothouse" of the title. The "Hothouse" is an allegorical hell which overlooks the East River, here representing the river Styx. (The Styx is, of course, the river over which the souls of the dead must pass in order to reach Hades). All of the rooms in the apartment of Elsa and Paul, the main characters, particularly the living room which overlooks the East River, function as prisons which are endlessly, suffocatingly, hot. They are stifling in spite of air conditioners and windows and the image of hotness is so pervasive that it affects both the characters and the reader. As Karl says, "even though the room [as a symbol] is a place of refuge it is also the locale of one's descent into Hell."³ What he means is that in twentieth-century literature desolate people are symbolized by desolate rooms, and that rooms protect, contain, limit, imprison; a room can be a nest but is more often a cell. The irony here is that the characters are all dead; they function as symbols of time: the past, put into the present by Spark, but with a future tense. All of the imagery comes together when "Elsa starts to laugh as if in company with the Nothing beyond the window, high above the East River."⁴

The rooms here are not rooms but, in a sense, graves, since the characters have been dead for thirty years. In a kind of flashback we are told, five pages before the end of the book, (in the present tense),

'You died, too,' says Elsa. That's one of the things you don't realize, Paul.'

'Don't be silly,' he says. 'I remember standing by the side of the truck when they pulled your body out of the wreck. I remember too many things to be dead.' (127)

The reader is told that

A V-2 bomb hits them direct just as the train starts pulling out. The back section of the train, where they are sitting, and all of its occupants, are completely demolished. (126)

Elsa and Paul have just left the British compound populated by German prisoners of war who are working for the British and by Allied intelligence experts. The train in which they are sitting represents, again, enclosed space. This information contributes to the general sense of doom which permeates the novel and is underscored by the oblique allusions to Hades. For instance, early in the novel, while visiting her psychiatrist, Garven Bey, Elsa refers to her arrival in New York:

'I came to Carthage.

Carthage?

She says, I could write a book.

'What do you mean by Carthage?' he says.

'You say you came. You came, you say. Do you mean, here is Carthage?' (11)

Carthage is a kind of mirror image of Hades since we know that it was totally destroyed in 146 B.C. by the Romans during the Punic Wars. Both places are repositories of the dead without hope of resurrection.

Some of the names in Hothouse serve to underscore the allusions to death. Elsa is telling the story to a man named Garven, a possible pun on the word "grave." Once again the names used by Spark are sugges-

tive and serve to reinforce the theme. This pun on "grave" intensifies the death imagery, the sense of absurdity and the aura of doom.

Elsa's woman friend, Madame Xavier, is called "Poppy," an allusion to the sedated, trance-like state both of opium users and inhabitants of Hades. In typical Spark fashion, Poppy, "under the protective folds of her breasts" (45) "conceals for warmth and fear of the frost a precious new consignment of mulberry leaves bearing numerous eggs of silkworms." (45) The worms "have hatched in the heat [and] now celebrate life by wriggling upon [her] breast and causing Garven to scream." (45) Worms suggest death, but these worms are celebrating life by wriggling on the breast of a dead woman. This is a typical Spark reversal and, perhaps more importantly is another attempt to play with the idea that, in time, life and death are interwoven.

Spark is not above manipulating the names she uses in Hothouse. Poppy is one of four characters in Hothouse who are named after saints. Her last name is "Xavier." Elsa's husband is named Paul, their son is Pierre (French:Peter) and their daughter is Katerina, a Dutch version of Katherine. Since so much is made of Spark's Catholicism, one questions why she has used the names of martyrs in this way. The absurdist view suggests her impatience with a world of alienated, isolated people, in which the living and the dead are seemingly interchangeable. Certainly New York in this novel symbolizes more than the frenetic depersonalization of metropolitan life; it is a metaphor for the decay of reality in general.

This idea of reversal or contrariety also dominates Not to Disturb (1971), one of Spark's funniest and most seamless novels. It is a book replete with reversals. In this novel a group of servants, master-

minded by Lister, a kind of devious majordomo in charge of the Chateau Klopstock, spend the night rehearsing their "exclusive" stories about a triple murder which these same servants have expected and tacitly encouraged. The doomed triangle (a kind of perverted trinity?) consists of Baron Klopstock, his wife, and Victor Passerat (notice the name-- "Passeret, French for "to pass over"), who has been both the Baron's lover and the lover of the Baroness. Victor is one more androgynous character and, once again, his presence in the novel underscores the sexually confused nature of so many of Spark's creations. (During the night, two of Victor's "female" friends arrive; one is actually a male in drag.) Much of the first half of the novel is given over to guessing when the actual murders will take place, since the three victims are locked in the Baron's study and have left word "not to disturb." The reader knows only that by morning the Baron Klopstock has killed both his wife and Passerat and then committed suicide. The pattern of reversal and the additional motif of sexual confusion is underscored by another Sparkian pattern, that of role reversal. In this case, the roles of master and servant are reversed; the servants are in charge even though the novel is set on a conventionally rich estate in Switzerland. This pattern begins with Georgina Hogg in The Comforters, another servant who dominates the supposedly stronger characters. We are surprised by her strength but, in the later novels, these reversals are part of Spark's increasingly absurdist point of view. "Lister, the butler, with a shrewd eye to the media, calculates the most sensational and lucrative aspects of the story with delighted enthusiasm and without a qualm of compunction; he is a mathematician dealing with angles rather than with people."⁵

He is both part of the action and an observer of it. As Judy Little has pointed out, "movie rights have been arranged, and the household staff, having rehearsed their stories, have been interviewed, photographed and recorded on tape. There is an ominous indication, near the end of the novel, that similar servant takeovers could happen all over the world"⁶ because one senses that the time scheme is out of kilter and that inappropriate people are in charge. Clearly, in Not to Disturb, Lister the butler is that inappropriate person, and he is very much in charge. As he says, there is "still more chaos effectively to organize." (45) There are also inept, insubordinate gatekeepers who don't "keep," servants who don't serve, a bumbling, innocuous Reverend who is not a source of wisdom and follows instead of leading, and more Sparkian games with names. Lister keeps lists; he is an organizer who is preoccupied with "style." The maids have resonant, suggestive names like Clovis (a fifth-century Frankish king), Heloise (a twelfth-century French mistress), and Hadrian (a second-century Roman emperor). All of these names suggest the past in a novel where the future dominates the present. Victor's two friends, who have presumably come to rescue him, are killed by lightning which strikes the elm tree under which they are huddled. "There is little indication of the norm; the other shoe never falls."⁷

The doubling of characters is another facet of the pattern of contrariety; thus, there are characters in many of Spark's novels who have doubles or alter egos. This pattern is emphasized in Not to Disturb because Spark is unusually playful here and she has created three Barons Klopstock. The first baron is murdered in the library; there is another Count Klopstock in Brazil. When the Klopstock servants

in Switzerland attempt to call the Brazilian Klopstocks, they are told that the count, according to his butler, is "locked in the study with some friends, and he's on no account to be disturbed." (93) There is a third Baron Klopstock, an idiotic, howling younger brother who escapes from his attic room during the night and is married off to the pregnant maid, Heloise. Because of that arranged marriage, the Baron's wealth will now be inherited by the servant-masters. Even the inclusion of this stock character, the madman or woman in the attic, so prevalent in the nineteenth-century British novel, is Sparkian. In later novels the "madman" in the attic will emerge as a dominant character: See Sir Quentin in Loitering. All of her novels have hidden jokes of this kind, almost as if she were playing with the reader.

Objects as symbols also surface in this novel. The Klopstock murders take place on a dark and stormy night but the lightning leaves "intact" the well-insulated telephone wires "which Lister, on the telephone to Geneva, has rather feared might break down." (87) The point is that the natural phenomenon, the tree, is destroyed while the artificial, man-made object prevails. This is reminiscent of the disordered garden imagery; watch out for beauty. Here, then, telephones have real significance but, as in Memento Mori, they are linked to sinister forces. Telephones are precursors of the electronic world Spark so much distrusts. The natural objects, which should prove stronger than man-made objects, fail.

In addition, there are several other motifs here: what should have been protected (the aristocracy) is, in fact, easily and profitably "disturbed," chaos is "organized" and time is out of its usual sequence in a profound way. The future, (media coverage of the murders) is

part of the present (the servants' vigil) before the past (the murders) has taken place. As Lister says, "what is done is about to be done."

(9) About the Klopstocks Lister says that "they have placed themselves, unfortunately, within the realm of predestination." (37)

One leaves this novel transformed by the power of the absurd. The last sentence of the novel reads, "By noon they will be covered in the profound sleep of those who have kept faithful vigil all night, while outside the house the sunlight is laughing on the walls." (96) The syntax of this sentence openly reflects Spark's preoccupation with time and its influence on the disintegration of the self. "By noon they will (future) be covered in the profound sleep of those who have (past) kept faithful vigil all night, while outside the house the sunlight is (present) laughing on the walls." (96)

Much of what transpires here has been suggested in an earlier novel, The Ballad of Peckham Rye, which Spark wrote "to give her mind a holiday."⁸ Peckham is also dominated by a malicious manipulator--evil but able--a devil figure with two names, two bumps on his head (where his horns have been surgically removed) and the energy to infiltrate and subvert two manufacturing firms in a working class section of London. Dougal Douglas/Douglas Dougal is a "supernatural" Scot, whose fear of crossing water is echoed by the witches in Robert Burns' "Tam O'Shanter": "a running stream they darena cross." Evil spirits traditionally fear lakes, ponds and rivers.

Dougal is a catalyst for trouble, an "Arts" man hired by Meadows Meade & Grindley and also, inadvertently, by Drover Willis to "bring vision into the lives of the workers" (49); instead he promotes absenteeism; "take Monday off..everyone should take Mondays off.'" (49) At

the same time he is ghosting an autobiography for an aging actress, Maria Cheeseman, which consists of misinformation, cliched romantic drivel and fictitious but suggestive sexual encounters unknown in the "real" life of Ms. Cheeseman. The more bizarre and dishonest the autobiography becomes, the more enamoured its main character becomes with her fictional life. This is an idea which Spark will develop more elaborately in Loitering with Intent, but Spark's message that all men (and women) instinctively crave the opportunity to re-invent reality, and that fictional lives are intrinsically more attractive than truth, is implicit here.

Like most devil figures, Dougal has a physical deformity and much is made of his one crooked shoulder. But Spark is a perceptive student of human frailty, and she subtly points out how his grotesque form makes him more, not less, attractive to the citizens of Pelham. Evil is always attractive in the novels of Muriel Spark because it offers an alternative to the mundane routine of existence, particularly mind-deadening in this milieu of typing pools and factory assembly lines. And Dougal, whose function here is to jar the intellectually and spiritually slothful from their well-defined ruts, forces each character, in varying degrees, to re-assess the known. He is a force for change, but the results are rarely beneficial.

So it is easy for Dougal to be the devil's advocate in the love affair between two factory workers, Humphrey Place and Dixie Morse, "seventeen, daughter of the first G.I. bride to have departed from Peckham and returned..." (10) Dixie is another one of Spark's twisted tightwads who pennypinches her way through a meager existence, squirreling away every shilling for a "spin dryer" and a bungalow; she doles

out sex as ungenerously as she spends money. And Humphrey spends most of the novel trying to unbutton her coat so they can make love in a closet. Dixie is left at the church altar by Humphrey with the words suggested subliminally by Dougal.

The vicar said to Humphrey, 'Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?'

'No,' Humphrey said, 'to be quite frank, I won't.' (8)

The sardonic view of emotion, or, in this case, the lack of it, is typical of Spark. There is no passion in sex and, in the other so-called romantic relationship, which ends with a murder, there is no passion even in killing. W. R Druce, who sleeps with his secretary, Merle Coverdale, thirty-seven and head of the typing pool at Meadows Meade, on late Saturday afternoons, is as appealing as the brussel sprouts which Merle slowly stews for him.

[They] ... took off their clothes in a steady rhythm. Merle took off her cardigan and Mr. Druce took off his coat. Merle went to the wardrobe and brought out a green quilted silk dressing-gown. ...Merle took off her blouse and Mr. Druce his waistcoat. Merle put the dressing-gown over her shoulders and, concealed by it, took off the rest of her clothes, with modest gestures...(53)

His violence is just as studied and deliberate.

The corkscrew lay on the sideboard. He lifted an end, let it drop, lifted it, let it drop ... [Then] he came towards her with the corkscrew and stabbed it into her long neck nine times, and killed her. Then he took his hat and went home to his wife. (136)

This scene is reminiscent of her short story, "The Portobello Road," which contains one of Spark's classic lines: "He looked as if he would

murder me and he did." (29) As Ruth Whittaker and others have noted, "People seldom have blazing rows in Mrs. Spark's novels; they quietly kill one another instead."⁹

Druce is a poor man's version of Godfrey Colston in Memento Mori, the much finer novel which precedes this. Both are drawn to equally odious females but it seems clear that the real problem is that Druce and Colston hate women. Druce seems more sexually attuned to elevators:

...on Saturday mornings he goes up to the West End to the big shops. He goes up and down in the lifts. He rests in the afternoon. Childish. (34)

Dougal says

'He must get some sexual satisfaction out of it'...Not one of the smooth ones but the kind that go yee-oo at the bottom.' and Dougal sprang in the air and dipped with bent knees to illustrate his point, so that two or three people in the Old English garden turned to look at him. 'It gives me...a sexual sensation just to think of it. I can quite see the attraction these old lifts have for Mr. Druce. Yee-oo.' (34)

Druce is a self-important martinet who has not spoken to his wife for five years. In one of those male-female encounter sessions at which Spark excels, the break-up is described.

...We don't even speak to each other. Haven't spoken for nearly five years. One day...we were having lunch. I was talking away quite normally...And suddenly she said, 'Quack, quack.' She said, 'Quack, quack.' She said, 'Quack, quack,' and her hand was opening and shutting like this--'Mr. Druce opened and shut his

hand like a duck's bill. Dougal likewise raised his hand and made it open and shut. 'Quack, quack,' Dougal said.

...She said to me, my wife...That's how you go quacking on.' Well, from that day to this I've never opened my mouth to her.' (66)

Marriages are fragile institutions in Spark's novels. They crumble quickly. (As noted elsewhere, Harvey Gotham leaves his wife because she steals three candy bars from a snack bar. (The Only Problem); Frederick Christopher commits suicide because he is bored with his wife's "image." (The Public Image) More telling, perhaps, is the fact that in seventeen novels so few married couples exist and the few who do are scavengers who feed off the pain and weakness of their partners. This novel, for example, will conclude with the marriage of Humphrey and Dixie but the reader senses that it will be as emotionally dynamic as the spin dryer which Dixie covets. As they are driving away from the church, Dixie says, "'I feel as if I've been twenty years married instead of two hours.'" (142) The reader can only pity Humphrey.

Dougal leaves Peckham finally to create mayhem and disrupt the status quo in new venues. Although Karl Malkoff in "Demonology and Dualism: The Supernatural in Isaac Singer and Muriel Spark" (41) says that Dougal's "identity is dualistic,"¹⁰ and that "...there is an 'angelic' component in Dougal's dual nature,"¹¹ Spark underscores Dougal's demonic influence by uniting him with one of her least favorite objects. Dougal, she notes, missed the aborted wedding ceremony of Humphrey and Dixie; "he was away off to Africa with the intention of selling tape recorders to all the witch doctors. 'No medicine man,' Dougal said, 'these days can afford to be without a

portable tape-recorder. Without the aid of this modern device, which may be easily concealed in the undergrowth of the jungle, the old tribal authority will rapidly become undermined by the mounting influence of modern scepticism.' (142) Dougal himself says that he is "one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls," and Spark says he "gazed like a "succubus," (28) (a female demon), but Velma Richmond among others insists he "is a good-bad character."¹²

Spark, however, frequently includes an oxymoronic character, one wise fool, who is, in part, her spokesperson. Here it is Nelly Malone, a half-mad streetcorner evangelist who lives in a messy, uninviting hovel with "clean dirt." Nelly says that

six things...the Lord hateth, and the seventh his soul detes-
teth...a lying tongue...a heart that deviseth wicked plots...a
deceitful witness...and [among others] him that soweth discord
among brethren. (107)

The loyal reader of Muriel Spark's novels senses that she too hungers after concord, but experiences discord, loves truth but hears "a lying tongue," honors innocence but experiences "deceit," and that even in this early novel (her fourth), her consistent preoccupation with reinvented reality, doubled identities, and a disordered world of alienated misfits is already ripe for exploration.

What Spark does in Peckham Rye or in Not to Disturb is to use obvious symbols in a different, one might say a perverted way. Trees often signal danger, not life. (This is reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield in whose stories water has sinister connotations instead of suggestions of absolution, baptism and cleanliness.) Houses are often prisons instead of safe harbors. (This is a motif found frequently in

James Joyce and in American novelists from Hawthorne to Capote.) Characters are trapped, either by flames or heat, as they were in Joyce's Dubliners, and two of them, Mary Macgregor in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Joanna Childe in The Girls of Slender Means are killed in fires.

Characters are sexually perverse because they are spiritually vacuous. They have suggestive names whose meanings are elusive. The participants in the world of Spark struggle to re-invent reality as its original definitions continue to elude them. As Bernard Harrison has said, "the loss of any assurance of reality, of the finality of any vision of what is or what has worth, is the underlying theme of all of Muriel Spark's fiction."¹³ That confusion over "what is or what has worth" is re-stated in The Girls of Slender Means.

The Girls of Slender Means takes place in London in the early 1940s. The novel records the interwoven experiences of a homogeneous group, young women caught "in the long summer between VE Day and VJ Day, the end of the Second World War in Europe and its final conclusion in the Far East,"¹⁴ who function as Spark's microcosm for the society at large. They are the forty-odd inhabitants of the May of Teck Club, established "for the Convenience and Social Protection of Ladies of Slender Means below the age of thirty years..."¹⁵

The May of Teck is a narrow, slender residence club whose four floors are populated by young women who work in London and by three older women who have been there since before World War I. Characteristically, the older women are known by shortened versions of their family names: Collie (Miss Coleman), Gregg (Miss Macgregor) and Jarvie (Miss Jarman), which suggests a kind of masculinity or androgyny common in

Spark's older female characters. Much of the action centers on the fourth floor where "the most attractive, sophisticated and lively girls had their rooms." (30) This floor has a bathroom with a "slender" window, the gateway to the rooftop, where Selina Redwood, the thinnest of the girls, and Nicholas Farrington, a bisexual, sometime writer, spend summer evenings making love. Although Farrington is the son of an upper-class English family and Cambridge-educated, he is presented here as an egotistical neer-do-well who "lolloped like an Englishman possessed of *droits du seigneur* while...two [of the] girls served him." (84) As Judy Little has pointed out, "he is a man so proud of his own sensitive heart and intellect that he will not condescend to discuss new poets with women; he and a companion can sit and talk of anarchism, while two May of Teck girls must just admire."¹⁶ Nicholas is a regular visitor to the club, where he has been introduced by Jane Wright, and is known "only as a poet of small talent and an anarchist of dubious loyalty." (40) The novel opens with the news of his "martyred" death in Haiti, several years in the future, where he has gone as a missionary. In Haiti he apparently felt called to "preach...against the local superstitions... the man was making a complete nuisance of himself" [and after] "several warnings...he got what he asked for." (143) Since Spark is so often discussed in the context of her Catholicism, one expects her Catholic characters to be sympathetic, to stimulate our empathy and compassion. At least in the early novels Spark's more brutal believers are somewhat equalized by examples of pious or decent Catholics. This is not the case here. And, Spark's convert characters are usually women, but in this novel it is Farrington who becomes a Catholic. "...He carried with him into his new faith a characteristic

failure to perceive that other people have interests, no matter how paltry or misguided, of their own. He dies a priest, but a priest of slender means."¹⁷

The Girls of Slender Means is not a so-called "Catholic" novel and neither Farrington's conversion or his later "martyrdom" are presented as hallmarks of moral virtue. In fact, although Nicholas is affected by Selina Redwood's materialism and superficiality he is himself a poseur and an opportunist. He chooses the profession of Christian Brother but Spark makes it clear that he fulfills the role without the reality. Even in Haiti he is egoistical, not altruistic; he refuses to recognize the needs of the Haitians. Farrington, in fact, is another example of Spark's involvement with contrariety; he is a reversal of our expectations: a priest who serves himself since he never masters his own egoism.

His conversion is also the product of two events, both closely linked to concepts of space, even though most critics see this event as Christian and epiphanous. "As Farrington watches from a nearby roof, an unexploded bomb goes off in the garden below trapping fourteen women on the top floor with only the very small window from lavatory to rooftop as means of escape."¹⁸ Selina, who anticipates the American Yuppies of the 1980s in her devotion to slenderness (of the body and the mind), is able to slip through the window twice while the "less svelte girls hover in panic."¹⁹ She climbs through the window into a burning building in order to rescue the taffeta Schiaparelli dress owned by Ann Baberton (notice the name), another of the "lively girls" who babbles and bounces her way through the social scene of post-war London. It is shared by all the younger roommates except the overweight

narrator, Jane Wright. The dress takes on a life of its own, as objects frequently do in the work of Muriel Spark, since it was often

wanted to support the rising wave of long-dress parties.

'You can't wear it to the Milroy. It has been twice to the Milroy...it's been to Quaglino's, Selina wore it to Quag's, it's getting known all over London.

'But it looks altogether different on me, Anne. You can have a whole sheet of sweet-coupons.'

'I don't want your bloody sweet-coupons. I give all mine to my grandmother.' (35)

The dress symbolizes the artificiality and false values with which these young women in "the cratered, blacked-out, austerity London of summer, 1945"²⁰ are enamoured. They suffer from more than wartime rationing. There is an emotional and intellectual poverty here as well, and their lusting after the Schiaparelli dress underscores this. What is interesting is that although we cannot admire them, we don't disapprove of them dramatically either. Young women are often obsessed by triviality and Spark knows this. Her characters are often self-seeking, silly or trivial. They are also appealing, affecting and serious. The girls of slender means are not particularly admirable but anyone who has passed through young adulthood, with all its false starts and posturing, experiences a shock of recognition. Critics who see these girls as residents of a hell for misguided Christians have made the devil a main character in a novel where he does not exist. (see Ruth Whittaker's The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark)

Spark suggests that it is Selina's crassness which inspires Nicholas to write in the margin of his unpublished manuscript (it is

entitled A Sabbath Notebook) that "a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good" (140) and to make the sign of the cross, a precursor of his later conversion. Certainly Selina is no spiritually solid redwood; her morals match her figure. She is devoted to shortcuts -- through the window to a summertime tryst with Nicholas and to perfect "poise... through the Two Sentences which she faithfully repeated each day:

Poise is perfect balance, an equanimity of body and mind, complete composure whatever the social scene. Elegant dress, immaculate grooming, and perfect deportment all contribute to the attainment of self-confidence. (50)

It becomes her litany, not as a source of salvation but as a motto for self-aggrandizement. Throughout the work of Spark the author makes the same point. The characters need to repeat themselves but they usually misunderstand their own messages. There is a lot of talk but not much communication. The characters in Memento Mori, similarly, who are warned to "Remember you must die," often forget. Sir Quentin in Loitering with Intent "insists on perfect frankness" but is the essence of deception and artifice. Selina wants "poise" but what she really needs is substance, not style. She is part of "an expanded joke, a pun on the meanings of slender."²¹ Spark likes puns and jokes so it is worth noting that in The Name Game Christopher Andersen says that the name "Salena" means "untrustworthy and is associated with "the moon."²² The moon often suggests erratic behavior.

The images here, on an obvious level, are of the edenic existence in the May of Teck Club surrounded by the hell of a destroyed London, but it is Spark's Eden, and it fits neatly within the patterns of

reversal and contrareity which Spark uses throughout her work. The May of Teck Club has survived the raids on London but Greggie, one of the older residents, is always warning of the unexploded bomb which she believes to be in the garden. When the bomb does explode it ruptures a gas main, which causes the fire at the club. The garden has a snake in it again, but this time it is a bomb, and the open space of the garden becomes the symbolic center of destruction. The club, at once a safe haven in a landscape of bomb-ripped buildings, becomes a prison from which thirteen naked young women, their bodies smeared with cold cream, barely escape through a narrow window. Both the open space of the garden and the limited space of the club are dangerous because they are both enclosures; and, as Frederick Karl has said of post-Kafka fiction, "space exists not as extension but only as a volume to be enclosed..."²³ and "conveys not the sense of something unfolding, but of something accruing like an internal growth which invisibly expands to tremendous size under cover of the flesh."²⁴ In other words, the ordered rooms and enclosed gardens here are metaphors for the enclosed and disordered people who frequent them. They are shallow, immature girls, their morals and figures are slender and their rooms at the May of Teck offer no real protection against a more amorphous danger. The garden is a pretty place but no paradise lurks within.

Spark is more than usually specific about tying her description of rooms to religiously symbolic numbers in this novel. She makes the number five into a symbolic object, as she has the telephone in other novels. Using objects as symbols is, again, a pattern, traceable from the typewriter in The Comforters, her first novel, to the clothesline and chocolate bars of The Only Problem, her latest novel.

"At the top of the house, on the fourth floor, the most attractive, sophisticated and lively girls had their rooms. They were filled with deeper and deeper social longings of various kinds, as peacetime crept over everyone." (30) This is, in fact, the fifth floor because the "ground floor contained staff offices, [and] above this, on the first floor, ...an enormous dormitory now existed." (27) (This is the European concept of the fourth floor.) Spark says that "on the floor above the dormitory were the rooms of the staff and the shared bedrooms of those who could afford shared bedrooms rather than a cubicle." (28) And "on the floor above that, there seemed to have congregated, by instinctive consent, most of the celibates..." (29) "This third-floor landing had contained five large bedrooms, now partitioned by builders into ten small ones." (29) Spark says that "at the top of the house [what she calls the fourth floor] five girls occupied the five top rooms." (30) I have included so much of this description because Spark has emphasized the number five in Slender Means in a subtle but important way. The one victim of the fire in The Girls of Slender Means is Joanna Childe, a country rector's daughter and elocution teacher who is devoted to reciting psalms and declaiming the verses of Gerard Manley Hopkins's, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." She tutors her elocution students by having them recite poems about death: Blake's "Ah, Sunflower" and Marvell's "Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun." Besides the obvious foreshadowing, the constant repetition of Joanna's favorite verses is linked, in a subliminal way, to Joanna's "Two Sentences." They are both mantras of a sort (here Spark again anticipates the cultural folkways of a later decade); they are both litanies.

The "most insistent and significant allusion"²⁵ here is linked to Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Tall, modest, virginal Joanna is to become Hopkins's nun who

read the unshapeable shock night
and knew the who and the why.

There are, to be exact, five nuns on Hopkins's ship; there were five wounds on Christ's crucified body. So the inclusion in this novel of repeated references to five girls, five rooms, five floors, underscores the link between the lost girls here and the lost nuns of the Deutschland. The nuns are trapped on the Deutschland and Joanna, with 39-inch hips, too wide for the window escape route, is trapped in the club. The nuns cry out to Christ from the ship's deck and Joanna recites "the strange utterances of Day 27 in the Anglican order, held to be applicable to all sorts and conditions of human life in the world at that particular moment..." (127)

Yea the Lord hath done great things for us already;
whereof we rejoice.

Turn our captivity, O Lord: as the rivers in the south.

They that sow in tears: shall reap in joy. (127)

The ship capsizes under the nun and as "Joanna promptly started to clamber after them, grasping in her hand a rung that the last girl's foot had just left...the house went down...the house sank into its centre, a high heap of rubble, and Joanna went with it." (130)

Allan Casson has pointed out that "the lines from the ode which linger in Nicholas' mind are Hopkins's account of a spiritual crisis of his own:

The frown of his face

Before me, the hurtle of hell

Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?

It is with just such a vision that Nicholas is confronted on the roof of the burning May of Teck Club."²⁶ There is a thematic connection, too, between the work of Hopkins and that of Spark. Both writers emphasize the necessity of being under and in stress. Stress is not only a component of life; it is a necessity for life. There appears to be an irrationality to the forces which confront us and these are represented by the trial and destruction by fire in Spark's novel and by the water in Hopkins's poem. Alan Bold has noted that "like Gerald Manley Hopkins, Mrs. Spark is possessed by the grandeur of the world and correspondingly distressed by the everyday evidence of negativity. In her fiction the grandeur is simulated by a language that draws attention to its own creative qualities; the negativity is expressed through sinister or diabolic interventions."²⁷

Joanna is in this novel because with her child-like name, her addiction to celibacy and her devotion to the end of life, she serves as a blatant contrast to Selina. But they are only two characters in a panoply of types we have come to expect from Spark. Jane Wright (she is a writer who is usually wrong) agonizes over her weight but secretly munches on chocolate bars which she keeps hidden in her room. (Chocolate is always trouble in a Spark book; Ettie, a terrorist in The Only Problem, steals two chocolate bars and that sets off the initial action in the novel.) Jane forges a letter for Nicholas which praises his work. The line separating reality from illusion is almost non-existent for Jane. On the evening of VJ Day, Nicholas witnesses the stabbing of a woman by a seaman during a victory celebration. No

one else sees the murder or hears the woman's cries. It is Jane's letter which Nicholas surreptitiously shoves into the pocket of the murderer. Both of these events are absurd because they are associated, as always in Spark's world, with happenstance and accidents. As Frank Baldanza has noted, "If anything about the climax is more repellent than the event itself, it is the idea that brute chance can play such a capricious role in human affairs."²⁸ This is a twentieth century vision, an idea shared by most writers, that we are all victims of our inability to control an often bewildering (if not bizarre) fate.

The novel's major symbol is a window, and that symbol is linked to the larger theme of reality and appearance. The window (as object) usually suggests clarity, the opportunity for seeing, both intellectually and in fact. But this is another example of contrareity in the work of Spark. Nicholas's letter is for a publisher who has two names (Huy Throvis-Mew and George Johnson). Nicholas is himself two people:

'He wants monarchy, he wants anarchism. What does he want? These two are enemies in all of history. Simple answer is, he is a mess.' (58)

Jane earns her living writing sycophantic (and usually unanswered) letters to famous authors in order to sell their signatures. She sells them to Rudi Bittesch, a cynical Rumanian roué. There are other minor characters who suggest duplicity and reversal, and it is clear that Spark is intent on upsetting our expectations, as she always does, in this novel. The most moral and godly of the characters, Joanna, perishes. The least moral and most materialistic of the characters, Selina, flourishes. The identifiably Christian character, the convert Nicholas, is no one's saviour: the pattern of confused sexuality

manifests itself in him. The pattern of creativity surfaces in Jane and Nicholas, both writers of a sort, but second rate at best, and there are several publishers who are manipulative and dishonest.

The Girls of Slender Means is a novel of supremely recognizable non-entities, living in the slender world of post-war London. In spite of this, it is a timeless novel because it speaks to the issues which will sustain the later work of Spark from the 1960s to the 1980s.

NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

¹ Frederick F. Karl, "The New Anatomy of Melancholy," in Contemporary Women Novelists, ed. Patricia Meyer Spacks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1977), 61.

² Walter Pater, "Conclusion of the Renaissance," in Great Essays, ed. Houston Peterson (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1960), 143.

³ Karl, 61.

⁴ Muriel Spark, The Hothouse by the East River (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 105. All other quotations denoted by page number in parentheses in text.

⁵ Judy Little, Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 158.

⁶ Little, 159.

⁷ Little, 158.

⁸ Muriel Spark, "How I Became a Novelist," John O'London's Weekly, III, No. 61, 1 December 1960, 683.

⁹ Ruth Whittaker. The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 12.

¹⁰ Karl Malkoff, "Demonology and Dualism: The Supernatural in Isaac Bashevis Singer and Muriel Spark," in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 158.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹² Velma Richmond, Muriel Spark (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 74.

¹³ Bernard Harrison, "Muriel Spark and Jane Austen," in The Modern English Novel: The Reader, the Writer and the Work, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), 244.

¹⁴ Richmond, 87.

¹⁵ Muriel Spark, The Girls of Slender Means (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), 9. All other quotes denoted by page number in parentheses in text.

¹⁶ Little, 137.

- ¹⁷ Ibid., 138.
- ¹⁸ Dictionary of Literary Biography 15, 498.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ The Times Literary Supplement, "Hell in the Royal Borough," 20 Sept. 1963, 701.
- ²¹ Little, 136.
- ²² Christopher P. Andersen, The Name Game (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 157.
- ²³ Karl, 61.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Allan Casson, "Muriel Spark's The Girls of Slender Means," Critique 7 (Spring-Summer 1965), 96.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Alan Bold, Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 19.
- ²⁸ Frank Baldanza, "Muriel Spark and the Occult," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 6 (Summer 1965), 201.

CHAPTER FOUR
LITANY AND LICENSE

The idea of litany, of the repeated phrase, the verbal symbol which consistently reasserts itself and both defines and encapsulates the moment, is pervasive in the work of Muriel Spark. Much of the late twentieth-century world view hinges on our diminished capacity for real communication and our seeming inability, even when the message is repeated, to hear, to see and to comprehend the experience of another human being. Spark knows this. That is why in Memento Mori, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Loitering with Intent and elsewhere there is a line, a message, which is miscomprehended or ignored. The introduction of this litany briefly interrupts the status quo but, like the sound of one hand clapping, it does not usually evoke a response.

A litany has, moreover, several definitions. It is a dreary, repetitive account - a laundry list of sins perceived, complaints unacknowledged, troubles and woes, usually delivered by a dissatisfied speaker to a uninterested listener. In a religious sense, a litany is part of a responsive reading of clergy and congregation - a recitation of supplications and fixed responses. This kind of litany provides a sense of completion, of communication, of questions that have answers, of pleas that are addressed. But Muriel Spark writes repeatedly of the unheard plea, of odd person out, adrift in a world where "people fail you" often because they do not really hear the message, even when it becomes a litany.

Spark's novels are full of bugging devices, tape recorders, cameras - objects which repeat and duplicate - just as a verbal litany is a repetition and a duplication of a message previously delivered. But no duplication device duplicates exactly, so these devices become agents in the novels which assist the characters in reinventing reality. Machines make copies of what is, but that copy sometimes changes our perception of the original experience.

Many of Spark's characters are obsessed with these devices because they are mechanisms for creating private reality; they are symbolic of what Karl Malkoff calls "the breakdown of communication between individuals immersed in private worlds... [suggesting] the inability of anyone to understand anyone else's predicament."¹ Also:

In following through their preoccupations, all of the protagonists in one way or another distort the nature of reality...in so doing they create a reality of their own [and] they imaginatively extend the 'real' world...²

Many of Spark's characters are aware of the incursive quality of these mechanisms. Curran in Territorial Rights wonders "if all his fellow diners are spies armed with 'eavesdropping devices.'" (247) Similarly, the servants in Not to Disturb set out to create and alter reality through the use of a tape recorder.

In Memento Mori it is a telephone which is linked to litany. Here, a small group of interdependent geriatrics, linked by lingering animosities, unresolved power struggles and the distorted remembrances of things past, receive the same telephoned message to "remember you must die." In each case that repeated line changes and distorts the

hearer's perception and influences the actions of the individual. In this way, a verbal litany affects, changes and distorts reality.

In Memento Mori Spark has created a collection of grotesques between the ages of seventy and one hundred who are literally facing death and spiritually contending with its implications. All are members of upper-crust, English society, privileged and trivial at the same time--a milieu familiar from The Comforters, but radically different from the mysterious and symbolic island of Robinson. Dame Lettie, the aggressive, domineering sister-in-law of Charmian Piper; Inspector Mortimer, the straight-thinking humanist; Godfrey Colston, an irritated and irritating eighty-seven-year old whose passport to the past is a short stare at a women's garters, all receive mysterious phone calls. So do Guy Leet, Charmian Colston's former lover, the crippled has-been whose propensity as a critic is to cripple reputations, and Alec Warner who researches life and carefully catalogues existence on three by five cards. Even Percy Mannering, who has lived on the fringes of life and the fringe benefits of poetry, is notified to "remember [he] must die." All of these characters have been catapulted into a segment of time that has no future because time is moving backward to the past when their personal visions of self were established. The generally accepted critical view of the multiple telephone calls is that Death itself is calling. That is Jean Taylor's answer and the opinion of most critics is that Muriel Spark is using Taylor as her spokesman for an otherworldly, better-world, afterworld, Catholic point of view. Taylor does say that in her

...belief...the author of the anonymous telephone calls is Death himself, as you might say. I don't see, Dame Lettie, what you can do about it. If you don't remember Death, Death reminds you to do so. And if you can't cope with the facts the next best thing is to go away for a holiday.(179)

The point is that in the traditional Christian view death defines this life and serves as a gateway to a potentially better, richer existence. The phone calls, like medieval death drawings and Everyman allegories, remind each character that the spiritual vagaries or victories of this life will be punished or rewarded in the next. There is an insistence in the existing critical material on seeing this novel as a pure reflection of Spark's Catholicism and, in that framework, this would be the only possible interpretation.

But a more intriguing and purer Sparkian twist is that it is the listener's perception of the voice which delivers the message that counts. And for each character it is his or her own youth that calls, and it is the voice of yesterday.

Memento Mori is a novel of static time and a statement about identity. Each character is locked into a moment of memory which has become reality. Neither the residue of the past nor the potential of the future is a force for change. Nobody's character improves because of the phone calls; no one's character seriously deteriorates. According to Ruth Whittaker, "...in this novel the supernatural [event or the phone calls] disturbs, but not for the better, rather intensifying the worst traits of the characters who are frightened by it."³

Memento Mori is also a novel of static people, a chronicle of people living in a special time between the initial moral decay of youth and the final physical decay of old age. There are no children, for instance, who could serve as a conduit back in time or forward. With the exception of Charmian and Godfrey Colston, these characters do not have any offspring, and the Colston's son, Eric, is essentially less alive and more spiritually decayed than his parents. What these characters do have is an irritating, exasperating mental vision of themselves, and each other, locked in the bodies of very old people. They appear to be breathing, functioning, visceral beings but the reality of their lives reaches the reader only through the telephone calls and through the preoccupations (Lettie's multiple wills, Alec's card files, etc.) which consume them.

The calls begin with Dame Lettie Colston, 79, who functions in her relationships as an attacker; she is always on the offensive with her maid, her nephew, Eric, her charming sister-in-law, Godfrey (God-free) Colston, and her unsuccessful protectors, the police. She epitomizes a form of stereotyped masculinity, a take-charge hardboiled approach which overshadows her femininity. Lettie is another one of Spark's brutalizing, boorish women. She has spent her adult years as a volunteer worker in prisons but psychologically she is as imprisoned as the inmates. Muriel Spark hates pomposity and she uses Lettie to satirize all those reformers who are always out to change everyone but themselves.

Lettie loves power. She has changed her will twenty-two times in the last forty years in order to control the allegiance of her nephew, Eric, and she viciously denigrates her sister-in-law at every

opportunity. As one would expect, after eight threatening phone calls, she turns to the police for protection, (she regrets that "flogging" has been outlawed) and, like Spark's characters in general, they fail her. Because Dame Lettie is in effect calling herself, she of course describes the voice of the caller as "strong and sinister (151) a "middle-aged, cultivated [person] who should know better" (101): her own youthful persona.

Charmian (for all her apparent senility), describes the caller's voice as that "of a civil young man," (150) but responds to his reminder that she must die by saying

Oh, as to that, for the past thirty years and more I have thought of it from time to time. My memory is failing in certain respects. I am gone eighty-six. But somehow I do not forget my death, whenever that will be. (128)

Her memory has not failed her in one strategic area. She remembers her success and by making her caller into a reporter ("Are you a reporter?...What paper do you represent?") (128) she succeeds in recreating the pleasures associated with that period. Charmian is an eighty-six year old former novelist but in her reality (and in her telephone call) she remains the charming handmaiden suggested by her name (see Antony and Cleopatra). Velma Richmond has pointed out that Charmian has "achieved the detachment that has long eluded her, so that she knows the absurdity of her life."⁴ It is interesting to note here that, as telephones receive and transmit voices, reporters receive and transmit news.

Godfrey's caller too is a man, but a "common little fellow, with his lisp." (101) His tone is "menacing," says Godfrey and Godfrey

receives his first call when he is alone with Mrs. Pettigrew, a mastering servant a la Georgina Hogg in The Comforters and prototype for more servants in later novels. Pettigrew is increasing her demands that Colston change his will in her favor under threat of blackmail, and is at that moment menacing him. However, the caller is menacing because it is Godfrey who throughout the book menaces Charmian. "Her mind munched over the humiliations she had received from Godfrey. Never had she won a little praise or recognition but she had paid for it by some bitter, petty, disruptive action of Godfrey's." (163)

It is typical that Godfrey reacts to the news of his sister's threatening phone calls with the words, "He must be a maniac." (160) Godfrey is himself the most maniacal of Spark's characters in this novel; he is a voyeur and an egomaniac who suffers from an exaggerated inferiority complex. Spark's genius for characterization is typified by her creation of Godfrey, an odious, mean-spirited little old man who splits matches in two to save pennies, and is too cheap to contribute to the nursing home fees of his wife's long time companion, Jean Taylor.

Charmian escapes in the early years of her marriage into an affair with Guy Leet. Critic Leet's account of his phone calls "is substantially the same as the others, with the interesting exception that he gets Tol calls from London at between six and seven in the evening when the cheap rate is on." (150) In Leet's opinion, "the offender is a schoolboy." (150) His phone call comes during a visit from Percy Mannering, who at that moment "...stood fiercely displaying his two greenish teeth and gripping the stick ready to strike, it

seemed,

anyone." (196) "Oh, it's you," Guy says to the caller. "Well now, sonny, I'm busy at the moment. I have a poet friend here with me and we are just about to have a drink." (196) Guy heard the "clear, boyish voice continue: "Is it Mr. Percy Mannering who's with you?" (196)

As the phone receiver is transferred from the hands of the critic Leet to those of the poet Mannering, the reality of Leet's youth becomes the reality of Mannering's. "'Remember you must die,' says a man's voice, not at all that of a young person." (197) Of course, as the voice of Mannering's youth it could not be a young voice. It is Mannering who has always made the "Four Last Things to be ever remembered:" (224) Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven (in the Penny Catechism) into the last four things to be ever remembered. Mannering is a man who has always been old, because he has dwelt on death, even in his youth. Mentally, he is linked through Ernest Dowson to the medieval world of Childe Harold since he has made the protection of Dowson's reputation into a modern day crusade. In the last analysis he has expressed himself not through his own work but by mental association with great, and dead, poets. "That's the man," he roars after his first encounter with the symbolic and untraceable phone caller, "his eyes [says Spark] gleaming as with some inner greed. . . It was a strong mature voice, very noble, like W.B. Yeats." (197)

It is precisely because Mannering has functioned only vicariously that he achieves his initial, and final, eminence by being placed in an alcove at the far end of a dormitory in an old man's home--"a position," says Spark, reserved for patients who have known better days. What the nursing home supervisors are honoring is Percy's

vision of himself, the reality he has invented. (Since Spark is Scottish she is probably familiar with Sir Walter Raleigh's character, Guy Mannering. This is an interesting transposition of names. The plot of Raleigh's book hinges on mistaken identities.) Even his final days he remains apart--the egotistical critic.

I should mention the minor character named Miss Lottinville. She makes her only appearance at Inspector Mortimer's house. Muriel Spark has given her a French name; we can assume that at one time she was newly arrived in England, and it is her caller's voice, alone, which is that of a foreigner. In my view, this underscores the connection between the telephone voice and the recipient. There is no other reason for this telephone voice to speak with a French accent.

Inspector Mortimer is set apart from the other characters. He serves as a striking contrast to them and, as Karl Malkoff says, "he is her most likeable character, the one who most humanly expresses her point of view."⁵ It is appropriate that Spark has named him Mortimer (Mortis means "death") for it is his point of view on death and time (More-time) that serves as contrast to the other characters. He understands, as Malkoff says, that "human action, which would in fact be absurd in the context of eternal life, becomes meaningful precisely because it is limited by death; time gaining importance because it is irredeemable."⁶ Despite Mortimer's announcement that "there is no other practice which so intensifies life...[as] the habit of nightly composing...thoughts of death," (153) he has been ironically surrounded by Spark with the symbols of life--children, flowers, growing things. Unlike the other characters, he has not become locked in a moment in the past. He has grown, fathered children, become a

grandfather, achieved a satisfying spiritual and physical communication with his environment and his wife. His telephone caller has a young voice, a female voice, much like his wife's, "gentle-spoken and respectful." (156) He accepts the telephone call philosophically: "It is, you know, an excellent thing [to remember you must die] for it is nothing more than the truth. To remember one's death is, in short, a way of life." (154)

What is essential here is that Mortimer's reaction reflects Spark's continuing fascination with the problem of reality and appearance, a pattern which will appear and reappear in all her novels. It is not "what we were" that he represents, nor "what we are"; it is, rather, the reality of "what we appear to be" that is embodied in Mortimer's statement that "we must all realize that the offender is, in each case, whoever we think he is ourselves." (155)

Each central character in Memento Mori, in addition to dealing with the ephemeral memories of youth, functions in the immediate world through his relationship to tangible objects. Alec Warner points out to Jean Taylor the natural dichotomy between believing in your own existence and in that of others. "Tell me, Jean, do you believe that I for instance, at this moment, exist?" (70) She says that "it's only common sense," (91) but it is the tangible object, the headstone in a graveyard, which convinces her that he exists. They are at least "an indication of the existence of others, for there are the names and times carved in stone. Not a proof, but at least a large testimony." (72) For Jean Taylor, the existence of graveyards is the proof of existence. This is a morbid viewpoint and as K. Malkoff says, Jean is

"perhaps too ready not simply to have death in mind but to exclude life."⁷

How does Alec Warner testify to the existence of others? Only by his ordered, obsessive attachment to his card file. There he carefully cross-references life. He generates data for these files by writing letters, of which the following is a prime example.

Dear Guy [Leet],

I'm afraid I sent Percy Mannering the last installment of your 'memoirs.' He would have seen it, in any case. I'm afraid he is a trifle upset about your further reference to Dowson.

Mannering in replying to thank me for sending him the article, tells me he is coming down to talk things over. I hope he will not prove too difficult and that you will make all allowances.

Now, dear fellow, you will, I know, assist me by taking the old fellow's pulse and temperature as soon as it can conveniently be done after he has discussed the article with you. Preferably, of course, during the discussion, but this may prove difficult. Any further observations as to his colour, speech (clarity of, etc.) and general bearing during the little discussion will be most welcome, as you know. . .

My dear Fellow,

I am, most gratefully,

Alec Warner (186)

For Dame Lettie it is the constant writing and re-writing of wills which substantiates her existence. Indeed, she would have no function in her world without her role as benefactress, as Godfrey

would have no proof of his existence without the semi-successful stimulus provided by Olive.

Mrs. Pettigrew, on the other hand, denies the existence of a phone call and by doing so, the reality for her of a past.

In still another way, Spark has created a synthesis. By contrasting the emotional sickness and perversion of the under-fifty-year-old group (Owen, Eric, etc.) with the horrendous physical decay of the over-seventy group (the "grannies," the geriatrics), she has linked the ills of the flesh with the ills of the mind.

By picturing the oldest character, Mrs. Bean, on her hundredth birthday as a mental and physical non-entity, and by ascribing to her youngest character, Gwen, the responsibility for Lettie's murder, Spark seems to be making a statement about "time" generally, and particularly about its effect on the "self."

One usually associates relative youth with relative innocence, and old age with old wisdom. Part of the sense of "absurdity" inherent in Memento Mori is the feeling that both ends of the temporal spectrum are rife with horror and are somehow linked.

Miss Spark has it both ways. She directly satirized the ineffectual old, who can no longer even indulge their vices; but her ultimate target is man in his prime, who no less absurdly dedicates himself to self-denigrating ends.⁸

Certainly the vegetable-like quality of Mrs. Bean and the kind of non-definable sexuality she shares with O'Brien are representative of the destructive potential of time. In Memento Mori the older you

become, the less human you remain. In Beckett's play *Godot* can be symbolic of what is potentially constructive for emotionally dying people; the Beans and O'Briens are symbolic of what is emotionally destructive to the still-living "grannies." The geriatrics have a tangible, emotionless quality like Ionesco's chairs or Beckett's potato sacks. As one progresses in age, an individual's sense of continuity with the real world is gradually replaced by a growing involvement with appearance. At the end of life there is neither awareness of reality nor involvement with appearance.

Charmian, Alec and the others are still obsessed with objects and entranced by roleplaying, but the inclusion of the geriatrics in Memento Mori is representative of the final destructive stage of "time." If one lives beyond a certain age he, inevitably, becomes an object as tangible as a telephone.

If the older people are objects, they cannot assume any lifelike qualities without being manipulated by the younger characters. It is this manipulation of objects that lends a sense of reality to the lives of the younger people themselves. Olive, in her role as an emotional prostitute, can easily manipulate the three men with whom she has a relationship. She gets information from Godfrey, sells it to Alec and gives the proceeds to Percy. She is essentially a scavenger who exploits the parasitic tendencies of the men. Her character resembles her symbolic name. On the outside she is fleshy; her core is hard, distasteful, unregenerative.

Intellectually, Godfrey Colston has succumbed to his own contrived appearance as the bon vivant of the octogenarian society in which he lives, and in which he must, therefore, constantly recharge

his virility. Olive, Mrs. Pettigrew, and fast automobiles are simply the stimuli. He likes women to expose themselves physically and, in an interesting play on words he is "filled with new vigor" when Charmian's extramarital affair is exposed.

For Alec Warner, Olive is an extension of his card file; because she unquestioningly accepts Percy Mannering's mutterings she reaffirms his mental association with literary greatness. This allows Olive to manipulate the characters she associates with. The other half of the mutual dependency is satisfied when Olive ultimately chooses to marry an object-like character, Ronald Sidebottom, also an octogenarian. By doing so she steps down from her position of power. Now she herself needs to be constantly attached to an object. Olive's reality is tenuous and her methods of dealing with the problems of reality are tenuous. She does things, she contrives, she copes, and by doing so, she is all method and no essence.

Only in Jean Taylor has Muriel Spark tried to create a character who puts the pieces of life together much as a tailor makes a whole from parts. She has been invested by Spark with an aura of religiosity. We are told that she originally converted to Catholicism to please Charmian, not God, but she seems the most sincere in her commitment and, whatever the whimsical origins of her conversion, she is now the most devoted believer. Spark underscores this when she says that "Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord. (224)..She resolved to make her suffering a voluntary affair. If this is God's will then it is mine..." (17) But Jean Taylor is also a complicated character and there is something hollow as well as hallowed about her. She is, for one thing, cold,

and detached, emotionally removed from the social dynamics between the other characters. (These are adjectives which have often been applied to Muriel Spark). And, like Sandy Stranger in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, a novel which was published in 1961, two years after Memento Mori, she is a betrayer, albeit one who betrays for the "right" reasons. It is Jean Taylor who tells Godfrey Colston of Charmian's youthful affair with Guy Leet; supposedly her motive is to spare him the blackmail attempts devised by Mabel Pettigrew.

The problem with the plot detail is that Taylor is divulging privileged information and this action mars her in the reader's eyes. It detracts from the halo effect which she must sustain as the center of spirituality in the novel. Betrayal is always a questionable act and whether or not it is viable in this novel it adds to the sense in Spark's work that no character is ever entirely trustable and the reality we depend on is, at best, fluid and amorphous. Ironically, this possible character flaw may stem from Spark's belief that "it's demanding too much on any human to ask them to be loyal to a party, to a system or a person for one whole of their life. To say 'you owe me loyalty' is a terrible thing."⁹

In a Pirandellian treatment of reality and appearance the raisonneur's most important conclusion was that "reality was not more real than appearance." This is at the base of the pregnancy issue in Pirandello's "Liola" and reaches its fullest expression in It Is So! (If You Think So). Beckett's arrangement of characters in Waiting for Godot, his reversal of roles at the play's end, is a later absurd treatment of similar relativism. The slave-master relationship is relative because you are who you think you are in any case. There is

no reality of identity to be eventually realized; it is a negation by Beckett of a basic, undeniable reality. When, as with Beckett, there is no reality, the events which cause the alienation, the disassociation, are not nurtured by time, and time, as a force, can have no real effect on a spiritual self.

Malcolm Bradbury has said that "Muriel Spark is very much a Memento Mori writer and indeed her novel of that title is a ...force which shows the comic unreality of human and historical concerns in its senile cast, and also evokes for the human lot a cool, instructive pathos..."¹⁰

Spark does evoke "pathos" here but the reader feels more pity than sympathy for these characters who are both intriguing and irritating at the same time. It is difficult to write a funny, ascerbic novel about a cast of self-serving and supercilious geriatrics without making them either the butt of cheap jokes, or pitiable feeble creatures from whom we distance ourselves as readers. This is true particularly when Spark suggests that inside these (and other) old ladies are the unresolved conflicts and unsatisfied desires which define most lives in the early and middle years; this is a Sparkian world where people grow older but they don't grow up.

Spark's success here accounts for the inclusion of Memento Mori on The New York Times list of the 100 Best 20th Century Novels and the judgment of most literary critics that it is a minor masterpiece.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is Muriel Spark's sixth and best known work and the "creme de la creme"¹¹ of her novels. It was first serialized in The New Yorker; in 1966 Vanessa Redgrave starred in a stage version of the novel in London and Zoe Caldwell played Jean

Brodie in New York. Maggie Smith won an Oscar for the movie role in 1969 and Geraldine McEwan became Jean Brodie in the PBS television version in 1979.¹² Few authors have successfully created a phrase which has been absorbed into the language; since 1961, however, it is a commonplace to hear about "the prime of" someone's life. Writers and speakers who have never heard of Muriel Spark talk glibly and gladly about being in their "prime" and a part of "the creme de la creme." As Velma Richmond has noted, "...a common response to the main character [is], "I had a Jean Brodie in my life."¹³ Only a character as vibrant and interesting as Jean Brodie could transcend the novel in this way; one is reminded of Joseph Heller's Yossarian in Catch-22, whose title has also caught on.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is about identity and about reality. The central plot is deceptively simple, the story of six girls, the Brodie "set": Monica Douglas, Rose Stanley, Eunice Gardner, Jenny Gray, Mary Macgregor and Sandy Stranger, and their charismatic but manipulative teacher, Jean Brodie.

The novel is set in Spark's home city of Edinburgh in the pre-war and postwar years of the 1930s, a time of men "on the dole" in the corroding, smelly inner city, the Old Town, and of middle-aged and middle class matrons wearing "musquatch" coats in the tea-party-and scones suburbs. Jean Brodie teaches in the Lower Form at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, modeled on James Gillespie's High School for Girls, which Spark attended. Again, Spark concentrates on a small group of characters in an urban setting as she does in Memento Mori, Loitering with Intent, Slender Means, The Bachelors and The Ballad of

Peckham Rye (all set in London), The Hothouse by the East River (in New York) and Territorial Rights (in Venice).

The six girls are referred to throughout the novel as Brodie's "set," a curious description used here to denote an exclusive or select group. They are to be her "creme de la creme" since she is now a woman in her "prime" and will devote these years after forty to them. "Set" is also a term used in mathematics to describe a group of numbers which have a common component. The component which these girls have in common is Jean Brodie; they are spokes on a wheel with Brodie as the center. Spark has endowed them with individual characteristics even though "Sandy...understood them as a body with Miss Brodie for the head." (38) But, since Spark is once again involved with the issue of reality, the six girls are themselves and, at the same time, aspects of the character of Miss Jean Brodie. In my view Spark is suggesting that we are all part of each other's multilayered reality.

Monica, "famous mostly for mathematics...and for her anger" (9) is the rebel who much later throws coal at her husband's sister. She "slap[s] out" physically when angry; Jean Brodie does so verbally. Rose Stanley, "famous for sex," later shakes off Brodie's influence, makes a good marriage, and lives the conventional life of a Scottish matron. As Spark says, Rose "shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat." (145) Despite Miss Brodie's insistence that Rose has "instinct" and that Sandy Stranger has "insight," the reverse is usually true. Sandy's most memorable act grows from instinct. Rose is the one with insight. Eunice Gardiner, "famous for...gymnastics and glamorous swimming" (9) becomes a nurse,

the nurturer which her name, "one" in Greek, suggests. This nurturing quality exists in Brodie too, although it is finally overshadowed by her compulsion to manipulate. Mary Macgregor, who is to die at twenty-four in a hotel fire, is always trapped--by her own incompetency and by Brodie's incessant casting of her in the role of victim. Mary is Jean Brodie's Jew, her scapegoat, and as Brodie's infatuation with Fascism suggests, she needs and finds a victim. The concept of space is important in the work of Spark and it is worth noting that Mary suffocates as she stumbles through a hotel hallway, overcome by smoke. (The girls of slender means are also trapped in a residence hotel fire in Spark's novel of that name.) In a curious way, Miss Jean Brodie is trapped too and that explains why she tries to teach outside, "under the elm," and why she refuses to marry Teddy Lowther, the singing master and pillar of the Presbyterian church, who lives in his dead mother's house. He later marries the Upper School science teacher, Miss Lockhart. (notice the name) Jenny, whose surname is Gray, is the prettiest of the girls and is an immature version of the writer character in Spark's novels. She and Sandy write a typical children's novel, "The Mountain Eyrie," a "story...about Miss Brodie and her lover, Hugh Carruthers." (23) In later books there are more sophisticated versions of writer characters who write novels about characters in the novel. Jenny is accosted by a man who exposes himself to her and is befriended by a policewoman, "short, fair [with] curly hair curling under [her] cap." (83) Since the policewoman's name is unknown, "Sandy decided to call her Sargeant Anne Grey." (84) The idea of androgyny with which Spark flirts in all seventeen novels is interjected here since there is a sexless quality

in this characterization. The name "Grey," neither black nor white, adds to it. Both Sandy and Jean are names which can sound both masculine or feminine so perhaps she is suggesting that reality here is neither black nor white. It is interesting that the prettiest girl, who is later to become an actress, has this name too.

Sandy Stranger, who "...was merely notorious for her small, almost nonexistent eyes..." (9) is, in many ways, Brodie's alter ego. She sees only what she wants to see and that is a narrowed vision. She has selective sight, as does Jean Brodie. Many critics see Sandy as Jean Brodie's antithesis, as the right-thinking character who perceives the evil in her teacher. But Sandy also has the need to manipulate the situation. It is Sandy who realizes that Miss Mackay, the headmistress who desperately wants to rid this traditional Scottish school of the "progressive" Miss Brodie, will have trouble doing so.

'It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools, where my methods would be more suited to the system than they are at Blaine. But I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory. There needs must be a leaven in the lump. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life.' (12)

And it is also Sandy who tells Miss Mackay that Brodie is a Fascist sympathizer and has indeed encouraged one of the Marcia Blaine girls, Joyce Emily Hammond, "the very rich girl," (8) to fight for Franco in Spain. Joyce is killed in a train wreck on her way to the front.

(Trains are potentially dangerous places in the world of Spark. Paul

and Elsa, characters in Hothouse, are both killed in a train.) Sandy "betrays" her teacher because Brodie "thinks she is Providence...she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (147) and "out of this delusion arises the principal conflict of the novel, the conflict between Miss Brodie's notion of the girls as the instruments of her personal destiny, and, the girls' natural, individual drives toward individual fulfillment."¹⁴ Sandy rejects Miss Brodie's efforts at manipulation and on a superficial level, hers is the common story of a student who grows beyond her teacher, understands her teacher's need for authority and influence and her methods of achieving it, and then rejects it. Sandy does not want to be an informer for Brodie or her confidante.

Ironically, it is Sandy who realizes that Jean Brodie is an anomaly, the free-spirited, anti-authoritarian teacher who holds classes "underneath the big elm" (13) and molds the minds of her eleven-year old charges with Art and Beauty, verses of Marmion, stories of her dead lover, Hugh, chapters of Jane Eyre and rhapsodic endorsements of Giotto and the Italian Renaissance painters. "These girls were discovered to have heard of the Buchmanites and Mussolini, ...the advantages of the skin of cleansing cream and witchhazel over honest soap and water, and the word 'menarche'; the interior decoration of the London house of the author of Winnie the Pooh had been described to them, as had the love lives of Charlotte Bronte and of Miss Brodie herself." (8) Miss Mackay, in tweed and sensible shoes, is the perfect contrast. (see Selina/Joanna in Slender Means, Mabel Pettigrew/Jean Taylor in Memento Mori, etc.) Her motto is

"Safety First" (13) "but," Brodie tells the girls, "Safety does not come first. Follow me." (13)

There is an important statement about reality here, and about the difficulty of defining it even within the context of a single individual. At the same time that Jean Brodie is flouting Miss Mackay's studied traditionalism, she is inordinately attracted to order and authority. She visits Italy and Austria on her summer vacations, brings back pictures of Mussolini's Black Shirts and delivers homilies on the man who "had put an end to unemployment with his fascist...there was no litter in the streets." (40) As Spark says, "It occurred to Sandy...that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascist." (40)

Brodie loves "order" even though she often has "order" confused with "control." At the same time, Jean Brodie is a romantic who weaves and elaborates on the stories of her dead lover, Hugh. She embroiders the fascination of Bronte's Rochester onto the muslin of a slight, twenty-two year old boy lost in the first days of World War I and the line between the real and the imaginary, between reality and illusion, fades. Brodie loves absolutes, and with her set of impressionable youngsters she remains the autocratic mindsetter.

'Who is the greatest Italian painter?'

'Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.'

'That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.'

(14)

Spark is no stranger to the idea that the same person can be both repelled by, and attracted to, the strictures of authority. At the Marcia Blaine School Miss Brodie sees her role as "the leaven in the

lump." Within her "set" she chooses Sandy for the leaven; Spark makes Standy Stranger both a reflection of Brodie and her betrayer.

Spark uses Brodie to underscore the pattern of contrareity: the schoolteacher sleeps with the school's singing master, Gordon Lowther, on the weekends, but is secretly in love with the one-armed art teacher, a married Catholic and father of six, Teddy Lloyd. In other words, Brodie is anti-authoritarian but pro-Fascist, she loves Lloyd but indulges Lowther, and, in most ways, acts as her own antithesis. Brodie needs her "set," her whole existence as a teacher is linked to the group experience but she is outspokenly against "team spirit." She celebrates the individualist--Cleopatra (see Memento Mori), Florence Nightingale, Helen of Troy.

The consistent thread in her personality is her manipulative bent and her need to fantasize and play with reality. Because she has decided that Rose has "instinct" and that Sandy has "insight," Rose is chosen to be her surrogate in a love affair with Teddy Lloyd and Sandy is to be Brodie's informer. But reversal, as has been noted, is a pattern in the work of Spark. What in fact happens is that Sandy Stranger becomes the artist's lover and it is Rose who informs Miss Brodie. The pattern of reversal, then, takes place within these two female characters and in the actions which they perform. Sandy remains a stranger to her teacher and in some ways to herself.

Spark makes clear again through her characters that reality is multifaceted and often contradictory. Sandy, who later converts to Catholicism (she rejects Lloyd but keeps his religion), becomes famous as Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, author of a celebrated psychological treatise, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.

Sandy, like Miss Brodie, loves both conformity and rebellion and both of these instincts are at war within her. Even "in her middle-age, when she was at last allowed all those visitors to the convent--so many visitors being against the Rule, but a special dispensation was enforced on Sandy because of her Treatise...", Spark says "...she was not composed like the other nuns who sat, when they received their rare visitors, well back in the darkness with folded hands." (43) She "always leaned forward and peered, clutching the bars with both hands..." (44) Her visitors (again the Sparkian twist) are the former members of Brodie's "set" who have now become Sandy's "set."

This mirroring of Brodie in the person of Sandy is a motif which pervades the novel; there are other distortions of reality which join Brodie to her students and separate her from them. Miss Brodie, for instance, plans to live vicariously through Rose's sexual encounter with Lloyd and through "the splendid, romantic lives that [she] plans for her disciples..."¹⁵ Like many parents, Brodie does not know where she "ends" and her children "begin."

And Miss Brodie said to Sandy: 'From what you tell me I should think that Rose and Teddy Lloyd will soon be lovers.' All at once Sandy realized that this was not all theory and a kind of Brodie game, in the way that so much of life was unreal talk and game-playing, like the prospects of a war and other theories that people were putting about in the air like pigeons, and one said, 'Yes, of course, it's inevitable.' But this was not theory, Miss Brodie meant it. Sandy looked at her, and perceived that the woman was obsessed by the need for Rose to sleep with the man she

herself was in love with; there was nothing new in the idea, it was the reality that was new. (146)

By using the six girls as surrogates for her fantasies, Brodie is able to enlarge the reality of her own existence, to, in fact, "transfigure the commonplace," and to preserve her version of it intact. What looms as unacceptable for her (sleeping with Lloyd) Brodie makes acceptable for one of the girls. In that way, she "has it all."

Sandy senses "what went to the makings of Miss Brodie who had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more exotic suicidal enchantment than if she had taken to drink like other spinsters who couldn't stand it anymore." (130) She understands that what Brodie really wants is to have the experience without having to experience it herself. "In this world love is a sentimental fiction,"¹⁶ according to Bernard Harrison.

Jean Brodie's 'renunciation' of Teddy Lloyd is no more a real renunciation than her affair with Gordon Lowther is a real affair. Indeed it is hard to see what reality either man has for her: in the end they are both objects of her fantasies. To give body to this genteel, garish world of dream-sophistication she makes real children its accessories and servants,...her 'set' is...quite literally an extension of her person."¹⁷

Brodie has therefore been multiplied by six and, at the same time, been divided into seven parts: a funhouse of mirrors with variations in each reflection.

Spark reinforces this multiplicity of experience in the novel in the many scenes which concern Teddy Lloyd and his paintings.

Teddy Lloyd's passion for Jean Brodie was greatly in evidence in all the portraits he did of the various members of the Brodie set. He did them in a group during one summer term, wearing their panama hats each in a different way, each hat adorning, in a magical transfiguration, a different Jean Brodie under the forms of Rose, Sandy, Jenny, Mary, Monica and Eunice. (136)

Jean Brodie is, in many ways, always seven people but in Lloyd's paintings these seven people are always collectively and individually incomplete aspects of Jean Brodie. Bernard Harrison says that Brodie "has sought to make the world intelligible on her terms by constructing a little world in which she can be, as none of us can in the real world, the source of all enlightenment."¹⁷ What this means is that Jean Brodie likes to play God. And from a religious point of view it is God who controls reality.

An additional and important theme in this novel is Miss Brodie's betrayal; she spends her last days, before an early death at fifty-six, agonizing over the identity of Miss Mackay's informant. "'I'm afraid Miss Brodie is past her prime,' [says Jenny]. 'She keeps wanting to know who betrayed her. It isn't at all like the old Miss Brodie...'" (127) Miss Brodie never really recognizes that it is Sandy because in order to betray a person, an idea or a belief, you have to first see it as real. For Miss Brodie, Sandy's love affair with Lloyd remains an illusion. She was "quite an innocent in her way," (127) because "she [had] never done anything, [had] never acted...the whole absurd charade of Jean Brodie's love-life is intelligible only as a series of devices to maintain an intangible barrier between the dream and the real world whose types and images

figure in it: to insure that no action passes this barrier."¹⁸ In my view the idea of a barrier is reinforced by Spark in a symbolic way. Much of Brodie's life has been the imposition of fantasy and illusion onto reality. She elaborates yearly on her now fading memories of a youthful lover, she superimposes onto Lloyd her dreams of a romantic hero, she stretches and molds her "set" like malleable "PlayDoh." But there is always the reality to cope with: the young lover is long dead, Lloyd is married and maimed, students grow up and away. And Miss Brodie, finally, is dying of cancer, the uncontrollable growth which she cannot control or escape and which cannot be incorporated into a fantasy. (She dies in the Braid Hills Hotel!) Brodie is too unfounded in reality to recognize her role as Rose's betrayer. Sandy is too immersed in her role as Brodie stand-in, and too fanatical and self-righteous to recognize her role as Brodie's betrayer. What they share is the poignant position of the betrayed. "...Sandy replied like an enigmatic Pope: 'If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word betrayed does not apply...'" (126)

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is the work of a genius. It is a novel about roles, about reality, about illusion and fantasy. The patterns which define Muriel Spark's fiction are discernable here. But in the last analysis, what marks this book as an example of outstanding twentieth-century literature is the creation of an enigmatic but unforgettable character in her "prime"--Miss Jean Brodie.

NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR

¹Karl Malkoff, Muriel Spark (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 7.

²Ibid., 8.

³Ruth Whittaker, The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 58.

⁴Velma Richmond, Muriel Spark (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 16.

⁵Malkoff, 26.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Spark-Hamilton interview, Guardian (November 8, 1974), 10.

¹⁰Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 247.

¹¹Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), 12. All other quotes denoted by page number in parentheses in text.

¹²Richmond, 16.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Samuel Hynes, "In the Great Tradition: The Prime of Muriel Spark," The Commonweal 75 (February 23, 1962), 568.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Bernard Harrison, "Muriel Spark and Jane Austen," in The Modern English Novel: The Reader, the Writer and the Work, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), 241.

¹⁷Ibid., 240.

¹⁸Ibid., 243.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEXUALITY

The decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the years in which Muriel Spark began and continued to write, were marked by an increasing public fascination with homosexuality, bisexuality, transvestism, surgical sexual makeovers and pornography. These are the decades which produced unisex clothes, makeup for men, pantsuits for women; the so-called common man (and woman) is now on intimate terms with the previously esoteric: hermaphroditism, androgyny, tubal implant, surrogate mothers, lesbian marriage, gay pride. The airwaves are inundated with daily talk shows on subjects which were heretofore reserved for the doctors' lounge at a teaching hospital. The situation prevails in Europe as well and the cinema and tabloids there are similarly obsessed with this subject matter.

Whether this proliferation of new vocabulary and the added exposure to deviant (or, at least different) sexuality is socially positive does not seem to concern Muriel Spark. She is, as has been often noted, a detached writer; she is less a moralizer than she is a notetaker. Spark records what she sees and what she observes in the international press. The reader emerges from this without a clear sense of her endorsement but with a lucid sense that the sexual proclivities of Spark's characters have come a long way from the world of Jane Austen. Hence, the general sense of chaos in her works.

There are more sexual games to play and there seem, at least, to be more gameplayers.

Significantly, the specifics of actual sexual interchange are usually missing from her novels. Spark does not include detailed romantic or sexual scenes in her fiction. She observes. "On those rare occasions when Spark creates normal heterosexual characters," says Sharon Thompson, "nothing overtly sexual takes place. In Spark, it's A-OK to be on your own. She regards coupling as an invitation to neurosis and parasitism at best, and to blackmail and general dastardliness at worst... That she gets away with this phobia against human connection without seeming downright mentally ill is a tribute to her mastery."¹ Samuel Hynes adds that

One finds the same quality of detachment in Mrs. Spark's treatment of the physical world that her characters live in. There is about her novels a striking sparseness in the description of sensory experience; people occasionally have sex lives, but none of them enjoy themselves--sex is at best a distracting temptation, at worst an abrasive emotional complication. The same is true of other pleasures of the flesh--food, drink, the natural world may compose the physical circumstances of a scene, but they are not dwelt on, and nobody savors them much.²

In an article which Spark wrote about having been born in Edinburgh she said that "a polite reticence about sex is often mistaken for repression."³ It seems that Spark knows plenty about sex but her characters are never lusty and sexual and when their sexuality is an important aspect of the characterization it is usually confused.

None of the existing criticism focuses on the fact that each of Spark's novels contains at least one character who is sexually ambivalent, repressed, homosexual or who engages in a sexual activity outside of the widest accepted standards. This is particularly ironic since so much has been made of Spark's so-called Catholic vision of the world. One of the most distasteful of these characters is Godfrey Colston in Spark's third novel, Memento Mori (notice the name - a play on God-free.)

On the first occasion it had been necessary for him to indicate his requirements to her. But now she perfectly understood...He then stood, arms dangling and legs apart, like a stage rustic, watching her. Without shifting her posture she raised the hem of her skirt at one side until the top of her stocking and the tip of her suspender were visible. Then she went on knitting and watching the television screen. Godfrey gazed at the stocking-top and the glittering steel of the suspender-tip for the space of two minutes' silence. Then he pulled back his shoulders as if recalling his propriety, and still in silence, walked out. (64, 65)

The object of Godfrey's gaze is Mabel Pettigrew, his wife's repulsive, middle-aged housekeeper. A younger woman, Olive Mannering, (granddaughter of Percy Mannering, the poet) is also used as a sex object.

She was twenty-four. Her skin was pale with a touch of green.

(88)

She lifted the hem of her skirt to the point where her suspenders met the top of her stockings, and with legs set together almost primly sideways, she poured out the tea.

Godfrey did not know what had come over him. He stared at the suspender-tips, but somehow did not experience his usual satisfaction at the sight. He looked at the clock. (39)

It is worth emphasizing that the younger woman is named Olive Mannering. Her name fits exactly Spark's characterization since Olive's skin has a "touch of green" (88) she has a fleshy exterior and a pit-like interior. We find out later that Olive is a minor extortionist and the money conduit between Godfrey and his equally repellent son, Eric. Godfrey himself is a character-type found frequently in the work of Muriel Spark. He is emotionally vapid, dull and constricted; Godfrey protects himself against any spirited soul who attempts to penetrate his emotionally arid world. He is no voluble, vociferous Moses Herzog, unraveling and out of control but packed with life, pulsating with intelligence and emotion: the quintessential Jewish-American intellectual. Godfrey is the quintessential Englishman, and in his emotional dryness and his sexual perversity he personifies a man who "runs out" without the fun of wearing out. Muriel Spark is particularly insightful in her portrayal of Godfrey, and in her description of his sexual peculiarities, because he is compulsively attracted to a kind of sex which is joyless and has no possibility of fulfillment. His particular brand of voyeurism is not a sexual experience at all because nothing happens:

he is an onlooker, an outsider, a non-participant--an asexual, not a sexual person and he is, in the end, his own memento mori.

In Chapter Three I have already mentioned V. R. Druce, a character in The Ballad of Peckham Rye, who has an affair with his employee, Merle.

They stayed in bed for an hour, in the course of which Merle twice screamed because Mr. Druce had once pinched and once bit her. "I'm covered with marks as it is," she said. (54)

Druce is a sadist and again Spark includes sex that is neither comforting or satisfying and the sexually active character is abnormal and aberrant. Sexuality, then, provides the Sparkian character with one more arena for failed connections and underscores again that Spark's fictional world is the world of the outsider--amorphous, unusual, unconventional and troubled. The feelings of isolation and aloneness are mirrored in the sexual lives of Spark's characters.

The experience of the sexually troubled outsider inundates a novel like The Driver's Seat, the story of Lise, who comes from no place and goes nowhere, except to her preplanned and inevitable death. Lise lives in a Council flat with a kind of insidious built-in, interchangeable and multi-use environment. All the furniture is convertible but, at the same time, immovable. In its supposed usefulness lies its uselessness--because in being everything, it is nothing.

The furniture is all fixed, adaptable...and stackable...The writing desk extends to a dining table, and when the desk is not in use it, too, disappears into the pinewood wall, its bracket-lamp hinging outward and upward to form a wall-lamp. The

bed is by day...a narrow seat...by night it swivels out to accommodate the sleeper. (14)

The adjoining apartments are furnished in an identical manner. The furniture represents symbolically the dangers of an increasingly mechanized global society--the facelessness and loss of individuality inherent in a cookie-cutter world. To some degree all twentieth-century literature records the loss of "self" as societies begin to replicate each other and the individual presence is lost in a sea of high speed computers, instantaneous transatlantic communication devices and instant replays of innocuous trivia.

Lise is, therefore, a prototype for characters in Spark's later work. She has no reality because no one knows her; she is as depersonalized as the world she inhabits and she is surrounded by characters who change residences, jobs, roles, even identities, with alacrity. After her death Lise is identified (she has been murdered by a sex maniac) not by who she is, or where she comes from, or what she does, but by the glaring, mismatched outfit she has so carefully selected: "a lemon-yellow top with a skirt patterned in bright V's of orange, mauve and blue" (10) and "a summer coat with narrow stripes, red and white with a white collar." (11) Spark's point is that Lise is the dress; there is no philosophy, identity, morality, nationality or reality under the garment which would identify her. The distinction between reality and appearance has dissolved. She is "Spark's least specifically designated and personalized heroine...a nondescript person [who] does not have a surname."⁴

Spark says that "Lise's eyes are widely spaced, blue-grey and dull. Her lips are a straight line. She is neither good-looking nor

bad-looking. Her nose is short and wider than it will look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly by actual photography, soon to be published in the newspapers of four languages. (18)

In a classic Spark touch, Lise has insisted on a dress that stains:

'Do you think I spill things on my clothes?'

'Do I look as if I don't eat properly?'

'Who asked you for a stain-resisting dress?'

'I won't be insulted!' (9)

There are two viable interpretations of this incident. A "stain-resisting dress" is one more example of the polyurethane, plasticized world in which Lise lives. In choosing the mismatched but noticeable outfit she has separated herself from the group. Perhaps she does not want to be protected from the spills of her own individuality. This interpretation would suggest that she wants to be humanized, not mechanized, and that she is willing to deal with an intervening world. On the other hand, Lise is so maniacal and disturbed that she sees herself as beyond stains. She is past the point of worrying about kinks in her plan; she cannot envision herself as an errormaker because she is already enclosed in an emotionless vacuum. There is, in effect, nothing "real" in Lise to be spilled on. One is reminded of Gaddis' line in the novel JR: "...how could I be inside, there isn't any inside!"

Like the central character, Signora Ponza, in Pirandello's It Is So! (If You Think So), Lise is anyone you think she should be.

Signora Ponza has many identities, one for each character in the play

who observes her. Pirandello's question is whether Signora Ponza has a lasting, incontrovertible identity which is not determined by her audience. Lise, too, is multifaceted on the surface--a quixotic, argumentative customer, a repressed sex object, a sympathetic fellow shopper, a titillating rape victim, and so on. Instead of changing her clothes, she changes her identity and her personality. She is a pawn in the game of reality, moved by Spark from one tableau to the next: an encounter with a disoriented older woman in a department store (her name is Mrs. Fiedke; she has no first name as Lise has no last name), another with a marginal cult crackpot, yet another with a lascivious garage mechanic. Each of these minor characters has a different sense of her, they want something from her and she becomes the fulfillment of these expectations. She is "a willing sacrificial victim."⁵ All the male characters in this novel have a sexual interest in Lise who says she has "no time for sex...sex is no use to me, I assure you." (94) The larger issue here is that Lise exists but there is no essence behind that existence. In Lise's non-commitment to anything other than a series of disparate acts, she is totally free and the anguish that accompanies the dreadful choices which she makes is classically existential. In my view, this is a morbid novel because there is no reality for Lise and the illusions which she attempts to create do not sustain her. She is a hollow woman in an emotional wasteland.

When the guidelines of reality begin to break down the characters must make some kind of rapprochement with the encroaching feelings of absurdity. "In Muriel Spark's novels refusing to define one's reality leads to emptiness and sterility, all too easily observable in the

non-religious world of the twentieth century. The attempt at definition may end in failure; not attempting definition certainly will."⁶ From Pirandello to Sherwood Anderson to Ionesco and Beckett a typical syndrome emerges: the breakdown of communication and the unrecognized, unacknowledged and often solitary pain that accompanies it. Spark recognizes that this loss of reality often manifests itself in manic, extraordinary behavior--a kind of crazy spiralling through a hole to blunderland. And she has played with this sense of disorder and derangement in the title of the novel. The Driver's Seat implies direction and control, and even though Lise plans her own rape and murder (leaving a trail of clues for Interpol to follow), it is that very sense of direction and of purpose that Lise misses. She is in the driver's seat only in an ironic sense. It is difficult, if not impossible, to exercise control over an increasingly chaotic world marked by both arbitrary and programmed acts of violence and terror.

And all of Spark's later novels are marked by the terribly terrifying act, i.e. murder and suicide in Not to Disturb, suicide in The Public Image, murder in Loitering with Intent, terrorism in The Only Problem. The terrible acts are surrounded by "...a strong undertone of emotional violence. [In The Driver's Seat] the salesgirl shouts, the customer, Lise, shrieks. The sense of pressure is intensified by Lise's rapid, almost frenzied, movements."⁷ This is a world where characters and actions are noisy and violent. At the same time it is a world where emotions are muffled and suppressed, leading ultimately to more violence, both arbitrary and planned.

In Lise's case, she instructs her murderer "exactly how to kill her and he carries out every instruction but one." (17) The murder is

planned violence. The arbitrary violence is related to sex, since "The murderer ignores Lise's request to desist from sexual penetration,

'I don't want any sex,' she shouts. 'You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning.'

All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high.

'Kill me,' she says, and repeats it in four languages." (106)

Alan Bold says that Spark is punning on the word "plunge." The murderer "plunges" into her sexually and "plunges" the knife into her body.⁸

This is the most bitter of endings to a novel about the Anonymous Lise, a woman for whom sex is the ultimate invasion and murder is the final solution.

Another novel for which sexuality is an underlying theme is Territorial Rights (1979) although it is also about identity, creativity, reality and the emotional and intellectual territory of the leading characters. Territorial Rights is set in Venice, a locale which easily suggests the floating, elusive nature of reality endemic in Spark's novels. There is a decaying tawdriness, an ebbing away of history and grandeur, which is juxtaposed against the lingering illusions of this special, magical world which "changed less than other places with the passing of time. (15) The fading distinctions between mythmaking and fact are especially at home in this setting, and reversals in characterization and reversed symbols are everywhere in the novel. The scenario here is one of Spark's most complicated, and, as Anthea, one of the easily defined and one-dimensional

characters says, "'It all sounds very far-fetched.'" Her friend Grace replies, "'It may seem far-fetched to you, Anthea, but here everything is stark realism. This is Italy.'" (161)

The plot of Territorial Rights revolves around a 62-year old, homosexual American, Mark Curran, "the rich, old lover [of Robert Leaver]...a canny but pompous ass who insists that his friends call him by his last name,"⁹ Curran is the kind of man who "would believe he was God if he believed in God." (65) Spark says that the effect of his being known as "Curran" to passing acquaintances has a curious effect on his relationships with women...unless the women were very young and free, or else tough like those older ones who rang him and said, 'Oh, is that you, Curran?' (as if he were the butler), most women stuck to 'Mr. Curran', and this kept them rather far away. (14)

Curran is pursuing his young lover who has recently left London for Venice. He is Robert Leaver, an art historian, who flits through experience, dirtying as he goes, in his multiple roles of "art history student, prostitute, kept man, author/black-mailer, and, finally terrorist."¹⁰ Leaver is aptly named by Spark because he "leaves" with alacrity any situation that requires commitment or dedication, and he "leaves" behind him the detritus of his poses. He "was a prostitute on the streets of Paris, posing as a student," and he "is a poser as a son and a lover, as well...."¹¹ Leaver is a 24-year-old bisexual, currently enamoured with the spiritually ugly Lina Pancev, a dedicated anti-Semite who is his moral equivalent. Since this is a Muriel Spark novel, much of the action takes place at a hotel named for Lord Byron, a poet-hero extraordinaire for sexual deviates everywhere.

Lina is a Bulgarian refugee, both fleshy and hard like Olive Mannerling (in Memento Mori), at home in her self-created role as international parasite. She is in Venice to find the grave of her father, Victor, who, it is suggested, probably poisoned the King of Bulgaria over thirty years ago. The dutiful daughter is only one of Lina's poses since she was originally motivated to flee her homeland by her cousin's tales of his affair with a freethinker in London:

Lina drank in the marvels, as they appeared to her, of wearing long skirts and tangled hair in an eight-room house, very expensive, with two liberated daughters and a husband who wasn't there but who paid the bills. (75)

Lina imagines herself as a decadent deserter, the bohemian Bulgarian in Britain.

Now she has become, "after some notoriety and a trip to [London] just another displaced person, uncertain about ideology, penniless, without territorial rights," (10) a refugee in Venice. After a series of plot complications, she ends up as half guest, half servant, in an attic room in the Palazzo "CaWinter." Lina does not know that Violet deWinter was once Victor Pancev's mistress and was an accomplice in his murder. Her job there, like her spiritual core, is ill-defined, since she is being used to extract information for a pseudo-detective agency called GESS (Global-Equip Security Services Ltd.) which actually specializes in blackmail. Violet deWinter is its "chief agent...for Northern Italy." (82)

In most Spark novels the characters who "use" and manipulate other people end up being similarly used themselves. This is a variation on one of Spark's consistent patterns--that of betrayal, and

in Territorial Rights there are at least eight characters, whose fates are both interwoven and at cross purposes, for whom betrayal of some sort is an option.

Lina is particularly cipher-like, even among the many distasteful females in Sparkland---and she sees the world as a terrorist does---an endless series of opportunities to strike out and create mayhem. She is singularly self-oriented and selfish

...I've brought my belongings to your house. You gave me the attic studio and I have my civil rights. I fled my country and I got asylum. You have no rights on your side...it is my right to make my profit in a capitalist system. (114)

She is also an actual and intellectual "pack rat," storing up her little pieces of useless existence against her imagined, unnamed enemy. She carries her five-kilo jar of lard, her Spirit-stove, her bundles and baggage from place to place,"...the only problem being how to get rid of the rubbish; (an empty mackerel-tin, a milk-carton, bits of egg-shell and some pieces of old lettuce") (11) and "she solves the problem by stuffing it up her clothes and shedding it in a back-street." (11) The "'territorial rights' referred to here, seem less to be political," as William McBrien has noted."...than the rights humans have, or fail to have, to others,"¹² and Lina Pancev is Spark's best example of this. In addition to her affair with Leaver, she goes to bed with Leo, a young American companion to Grace Gregory. Gregory is the retired Matron at Ambrose College, where Leaver's father was formerly the headmaster. When Lina finds out that Leo is half-Jewish, she jumps into the canal to "wash away" the encounter. Spark's joke here is that every ablution does not assure absolution.

Some characters are too morally filthy to be cleansed. Lina returns finally to Bulgaria with another of her lovers, her cousin, Serge.

Victor Pancev's story is also a comment on sexuality because during his World War II residency in Venice he had as lovers the sisters Eufemia and Katerina, now owners of the Villa Sophia, who had his deceased body butchered so they could each have a part to bury in their garden. (See the bomb in the garden in The Girls of Slender Means, the "bugged" popular trees in The Abbess of Crewe, etc.) As part of her Venice phase, Lina also dallies with Leaver's father, Arnold, who is in town with his mistress, Mary Tiller. To spite Robert, she accompanies Leaver, Sr. to the garden of the Villa Sophia. She inadvertently dances on that part of the grass which covers her father's grave, a kind of "dance macabre" and a parody of the nineteenth century English plot convolutions so familiar to Spark. The sisters themselves are a reminder of evil past and present since they are linked to Curran and Violet, the old Nazis; to Giorgio, the butcher and his niece, Anna, (he helped to carve up Pancev); and incidentally to Lina and the Leavers. They are at the center of various forms of "covering up" in this novel: Giorgio's blackmail letters, Pancev's rose-covered grave, Arnold Leaver's affair with Mary. Their most vociferous outbursts are about the leaves in the garden.

On the other side of the...boundary...Katerina, having reluctantly conceded the battle, bent to pick up in little handfuls the stray leaves; she threw them on to the vivid pile on the side where she stood and achieved this without placing her foot over the boundary. At one point, when three spreadeagled

sprays of foliage seemed too far away for Katerina to reach,

Eufemia pushed them nearer to hand with her shoe. (13)

They want territorial rights too.

Anthea Leaver, who never leaves the chintz-covered world of the Birmingham middle class, is a striking contrast to Lina Pancev. She says that she "married for marriage in general but more specifically for her wedding day, the event, the white dress, the hymns and the flowers, the picture in the papers." (58) She is a woman addicted to trashy, romantic novels and to impoverished romantic ideas. Her role here is to be a believer in her own myth: she refuses to acknowledge the homosexuality of her son, Robert, who lives not only in a different world, but almost on a different planet from his mother. She is only minimally conscious of her husband's affair; her real objection is to missing out on a trip to Venice which she feels she deserves. That is her "territory" and in a novel where emotional or physical space is usually invaded, Anthea wants a safe haven---home, husband, hearth. She wants to be safely protected from reality.

Violet deWinter differs radically from Anthea Leaver. She uses people instead of being used; and in fact, her income, derived originally from her late husband and her Nazi sympathies, is refurbished through her connection with GESS. At her suggestion, Curran (her old "friend") is blackmailed for \$250,000.00. She too is a terrorist of sorts. She invades the secret emotional worlds of the rich with impunity and for profit. Violet is one of the many intellectual prostitutes in the works of Muriel Spark; in her case the manipulating and mythmaking have a political edge. Curiously, she has a "flower name" (Violet) as do many of Spark's

odiferous women. See Freda Flower in The Bachelors and Poppy in The Hothouse by the East River.

Territorial rights imply permanence but in this novel there is a motif of movement, of running from, not to, a place. Lina, an alien in Venice, runs back to Bulgaria to be similarly displaced there where "...she was put to happy use as a first-rate example of a repentant dissident, the moment...being right." (238) Curran, who "knew Venice well, it had been his territory for the best part of his life..." (15) goes off "to India to see his guru." (239) Leaver, a born terrorist at heart, and a "nasty young man in his way..." (89) and Anna, the butcher's niece, are enlisted by professionals to be formally trained as murderers in the Middle East. Leaver, Sr., who has been running around, in spite of a mistress named "Tiller," returns to Anthea and her make-believe world.

The mythmakers and artist figures reappear in this novel but they are not substantial and productive like Fleur Talbott (in Loitering) or Caroline Rose in (The Comforters). They are only nominally artistic and unsuccessful at changing or creating reality. Robert says he could write a novel about the Pancev affair but instead he writes blackmail letters laced with truth and invention. Curran, as Robert Leaver says, "paints too, you know," (18) and Lina "had an early talent for drawing; later she learned to paint objects with photographic exactitude, and to portray people a little larger than life...she went to the Black Sea and did work-groups at the docks all looking in the same direction, very tanned; and she excelled at women, large and strong, coming out of the shoe factory near her home, all looking healthy and refreshed after a good day's work." (69)

All of this contributes to the air of absurdity so noticeable in Spark's world in the 70s and 80s. No place seems to be safe because the blackmailers, the spies, and the terrorists have taken over. They are not "right," but they are, at least in this novel, noticeably in charge of the territory.

In Spark's second novel, the "artist as character" is a somewhat displaced middle-aged woman with the curious name of January Marlow. As Carol B. Ohmann has pointed out, "through her title, Robinson...Spark reminds us, of course, of Defoe's eighteenth-century classic and hence of a narrative of literal adventure. When she names her heroine 'January Marlow,' however, she simultaneously hints at other, more modern concerns. The god Janus showed two faces; and Marlow carries Conradian associations that also suggest the possibility of a self divided."¹³ Mrs. Marlow is a travel writer (she is writing a book about islands) who describes herself as a "poet, critic, and general articulator of ideas." Her travels have been dramatically curtailed by the plane crash of which she is a recent survivor. She wakes up to find herself the guest of a reclusive, eccentric, fallen-away Catholic, Miles Mary Robinson, who owns the island where he lives alone except for a mysterious nine-year-old Portuguese boy, Miguel, who will be leaving soon for boarding school.

This is a strange island, shaped like a human body, full of hidden tunnels and fiery furnaces which bubble and boil like the unresolved emotional conflicts of Spark's central character, the writer January. Her psychological problems are not limited to the effects of the plane crash; she is a widow, the mother of a teen-age son, Brian, the survivor of a brief and apparently unhappy marriage to

a 58-year old man who eloped with her, intellectually tyrannized her and then died. (Spark herself was married briefly in 1938 to S. O. Spark in Rhodesia, had one son, Robin, and was soon divorced. She returned to England in 1944.¹⁴

The artist character is lost in several labyrinths in this novel. She has emerged from the domination of her dead husband only to accede to the domination of her straightlaced and morbid older sister, Agnes, and her brother-in-law, Ian Brodie, a fanatical Catholic devoted to the very Marian worship (the idealization of the Virgin Mary) which Robinson abhors. It is, in fact, Robinson's stated reason for leaving the Catholic Church; he is devoted to an austere and rational faith, not the emotional and primitive piety of the Marianists. (He is also a writer, author of The Dangers of Marian Doctrine.)

Secondly, she becomes a pawn in the interplay between the other two survivors, Wells, a minor crook and entrepreneur in good luck charms, and Jimmie Waterford, a relative of Robinson, who is emotionally invested in his own hunger for money, women and unending leisure. She is caught symbolically between the "water" and the "well"; both are potential drowning pools for her.

Ohmann has pointed out that the novel can be read as allegory, as "a quite precise delineation of an extraordinary psychic experience. After the crash...January wakes under the firm control of her superego. Robinson is in command...[but] January rebels against Robinson"¹⁵ who disappears. He has faked his own murder. That disappearance "represents the death of her superego."¹⁶ This is classically Freudian. Robinson functions here as January's superego. Her ego should now "take control"¹⁷ (77) but she is still "torn by the

conflicting demands of her superego and id"¹⁷ represented by Wells. Until she challenges Robinson her selfhood cannot emerge.

Robinson is no pliable or accessible antagonist, against whom any female character might test her own emotional resources. He epitomizes his own "man-shaped island with its cultivated Headlands representing the intellect..."¹⁸ There are interior spaces for this island which Ruth Whittaker says represent "the sexual and aggressive instincts"¹⁹ but Spark's hero is clearly more comfortable in the "headlands" where, finally, he physically and emotionally hides from his three unwanted visitors. His maleness, escape to the headlands, and anti-Marianist views, are tied together. Robinson rejects a church characterized as female, as Mother. He wants a church of authority and order which is antiseptic and not sentimentalized or softened by femininity. In the same way that he has moved away from a female-defined church, he moves away from January in his fake flight to the Headlands. Spark's men are either exaggerated versions of the female stereotype in their fascination with triviality and artificiality or equally exaggerated versions of the male stereotype involved in control, authority and single-mindedness. Robinson is the latter.

One of the reasons that Robinson is widely considered to be out of the mainstream for Spark and weaker than the one novel which precedes it (The Comforters) and those which follow, is the dichotomy between the desiccating self-control of Robinson and the overly fecund lack of control in January. She

looked for routes of escape, positions of concealment, protective rocks; instinctively...looked for edible vegetation. In fact, I must have been afraid. And whereas, on my previous travels, I

had been scenery and landscape-minded, had been botanically inclined, had been geologically enchanted, had known the luxury of anthropological speculations, I found myself now noting the practical shelter to be obtained from small craters and gulches and lava caverns. (30)

In other words, Robinson is too in control, and January too without it, to be believed in the same context. At the same time that she is seeking food, protection and survival, she is locked in an unbelievable battle of wills with Robinson over teaching the rosary to Miguel, for whom the Hail Marys are no more than a word game without substance. January exerts her will in this issue but it is more in an effort to challenge Robinson than an emblem of her Catholic commitment, in my view, although most critics see Robinson as a novel where "religion is a central theme."²⁰ Robinson equates the rosary with superstition. January claims to see it as "Christian devotion." (102) But strangely she injects the saying of the rosary with a kind of magic, artificial power, uses it as an empty talisman, by teaching it to Miguel secretly and in Robinson's absence. Her words, "'I am happy to say I have taught the child the rosary,'" (176) sound like the feeble challenge of a woman in defiance of an overbearing authority figure, not the words of a Catholic woman who has "grow[n] in grace"²¹ or gracefulness. Spark hints at this when she says

'I see no call to tear myself to bits over motives,'...

'They are never simple...' (167)

January does understand, perhaps subliminally, the power of litany, Catholic or otherwise, as does Jean Brodie in a later book. She knows that she can establish a bond with Miguel by the repetition of a

phrase which becomes associated with him. Here it is Hail Mary; in Prime of Miss Jean Brodie it is "you are the creme de la creme."

January is a contradiction, a travel writer off to explore islands for other travelers, but really searching for herself, and far too confused and threatened to be anyone else's guide. She is an early example of the theme of contrareity in Spark--a character who is a reversal of what the reader expects. The real castaway on this island is not Robinson Crusoe or the Swiss family or Spark's Robinson, but January Marlow. She is the character who is lost. Robinson is not a castaway figure because he lives on an island; he would be alone in London (on another island) because he is, of his own volition, emotionally divorced from these characters and from the world. In a sense, he is his own island, separated from the mainland of other people by waterless barriers of his own construction.

January herself says that "some [people] are [islands]. Their only ground of meeting is concealed under the sea. If words mean anything, and islands exist, then some people are islands." Robinson is a precursor of many Sparkian characters; he expects the worst of life and of people, and suggests, in his person, Spark's often quoted opinion that "people fail you." As Allan Massie has said "even her Catholic characters exist in an alien uncomprehending world."²² Aptly, his only connection with the world is a pomegranate boat which is supposed to stop at this island in August. A pomegranate is a red, juicy fruit with a leathery rind, filled with many seeds and covered by fleshy, pulpy flesh. They are traditionally associated with females, even though Robinson tells January that the pomegranate orchards on his island were planted by King Arthur. Robinson spends

his days cultivating the symbolic female (the orchard) and the pomegranate boat is his link with civilization, but he remains emotionally separated from both and from January. This sense of estrangement between the sexes becomes one of Spark's consistent patterns. In Not to Disturb the women are ploys and toys, used to set up the triple murder, and the men are manipulative, crazy or sexually disturbed. The women in The Takeover are vipers and the men are sychophants and weaklings. There are variations of this estrangement and disaffection between the sexes in all of Spark's novels. It is believable in a Spark novel, for instance, that one woman could spend three months on an island with three men and for all of them to remain celibate and physically aloof from each other. There is only the slightest sexual tension here.

Islands remain islands. There are no isthmuses. This pattern of estrangement becomes so entrenched in Spark's work that in The Only Problem, written twenty-five years after Robinson, the male character works, and sometimes lives, in a separate house from his wife. In a sense he is back on an island.

Another of Spark's minor patterns surfaces in Robinson--the introduction of the occult, the magical, the magnetic quality of the bizarre which fascinates Spark. Her novels acknowledge the unexplainable--a woman whose shadow falls the wrong way in The Hothouse by the East River, the attraction of the seance in Peckham Rye, talking typewriters in The Comforters and prophetic telephone messages in Memento Mori. January says, in fact, that the only viable society is one that "allows for the unexpected and unwelcome." (30) She often feels like repeating her grandmother's prayers to the moon

and she teaches Robinson's cat, Bluebell, to play ping-pong. The inexplicable is explicit in Spark.

Spark's propensity for patterns intrigues the reader, especially when those patterns are more playful than philosophical. For instance, in Robinson she seems to be enchanted by the number three, but it is the pattern which the reader notices; the significance is more elusive. Why are there three survivors of the plane crash, three men on the island, which has three secret tunnels, a boat which arrives in three months and three planes that circle overhead? January, Tom Wells and Waterford are stranded for three months, Robinson's house has three rooms, and the pomegranate workers will stay on the island for three weeks. Tom Wells gives Miguel three charms. January says her grandmother used to "bow three times" (9) to the moon. Spark says that "Jimmie [Waterford] sat like three wise monkeys..." (48) and Tom Wells gets out of bed at the end of the third week. January is writing a book about three islands and she is one of three sisters. Robinson, as one would expect, was born in 1903.

Robinson is not a masterpiece. The characters are noticeably less interesting than those in The Comforters and the novel pales next to its successor, Memento Mori, widely considered to be a work of genius. But it is important because several of the patterns which will reappear and define Spark's work have their genesis here.

NOTES

CHAPTER FIVE

- ¹Sharon Thompson. "The Canonization of Muriel Spark," Village Voice. October 1986, 9.
- ²Samuel Hynes, "In The Great Tradition: The Prime of Muriel Spark," The Commonweal 75 (February 23, 1962), 563.
- ³Muriel Spark, "Edinburgh-Born," New Statesman (August 10, 1962), 23.
- ⁴Velma Richmond, "The Darkening Vision of Muriel Spark," Critique 15 (Spring 1973), 76.
- ⁵Alan Bold, ed., Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 16.
- ⁶Ann B. Dobie, "Muriel Spark's Definition of Reality," Critique 12 (December 1970), 12.
- ⁷Faith Pullin, "Autonomy and Fabulation in the Fiction of Muriel Spark," in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 75.
- ⁸Bold, 17.
- ⁹Edmund White, "Fun in Venice," New York Times (May 20, 1979), 1.
- ¹⁰Dictionary of Literary Biography, 506.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²William McBrien, "Muriel Spark: the novelist as dandy," in Twentieth-Century Women Novelists, ed. Thomas F. Staley (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1982), 43.
- ¹³Carol B. Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's Robinson," Critique 8 (Fall, 1965), 71.
- ¹⁴Velma Richmond, Muriel Spark (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 3.
- ¹⁵Ohmann, 77.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ruth Whittaker, The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 28.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹See Baldanza, Kemp, Schneider.

²²Whittaker, 58.

²²Allan Massie, "Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark," in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 75.

CHAPTER SIX

CREATIVITY

Soren Kierkegaard said that "his task was 'to create difficulties everywhere'"¹ and as Tom Hubbard and other critics have noted, "Muriel Spark does likewise."² Fortunately, in addition to the blackmailers, betrayers, grotesques (of both genders and many nations), the committed or odious Catholics, the parade of eccentric sexual misfits, egocentrics, malingerers, and fetishists, she provides the reader with an artist figure who attempts to re-invent reality and who represents the power of creativity in an ephemeral, confused and complicated society.

Caroline Rose in The Comforters is a critic and a writer. She is writing a book, Form in the Modern Novel and is struggling to break through the inertia which many writers experience when confronted by the blank page. Ms. Rose is having trouble with "form," a typical Sparkian concern, because in Spark's often absurd world, it is difficult, if not impossible, to superimpose form on experience. (In fact, Spark's latest novel, The Only Problem, deals obliquely with the book of Job, but, more profoundly, with understanding the experience of Job--giving it a "form" which humanity can accept. Understanding why God punishes Job so harshly is, for Harvey Gotham, the "only problem" worth solving.) Caroline Rose is unable to analyze the form of the modern novel and thus she becomes a character in her own story. She is both Spark's main character in The Comforters and a character

in her own work, Form in the Modern Novel. This is a device which Spark will develop more fully, but with more intricate machinations in Loitering with Intent.

The concept is clear: there is a tenuous demarcation here between what is real and what seems to be real which is established in her first novel. At the end of The Comforters Caroline Rose's typewriter begins, without her assistance, to type out a novel whose story line is the life of Caroline Rose. The typewriter becomes, in effect, a novelist, and is able to record both the spoken and unspoken thoughts of Rose and of her former lover, Lawrence Manders, and his mother, Helena. Caroline refers to the typewriter as the "typing ghost."³

I suppose Caroline wants to get her book off her hands. But I don't know their business at all really. I wish they would do something definite, but there it is.

Caroline's 'book,'" he said; "do you mean the book she is writing or the one in which she lives?" (my emphasis)

Now, Willi! Caroline is not a silly girl. She did have a little upset and imagines things, I know. And then there was the accident. But since that time she's recovered wonderfully.

My dear Helena. I do assure you that Caroline has been receiving communications from her Typing Spooks continuously since that time. (211)

In The Comforters the typewriter is referred to as a "ghost" and Caroline's lover is named "Manders." In Ibsen's play, Ghosts, the pivotal character is named Pastor Manders and the central issue of the play is a discussion of the masks which human beings prepare, and

present to, the public. The play is also about the elusiveness of reality (if it exists) beneath those masks. In my view Spark includes this allusion to Ibsen, this submerged "joke" and many others like it in order to accentuate her questions about reality and appearance and to underscore the importance of the objects and the names in her novels.

Caroline Rose's enemy in The Comforters is an unappealing, malicious former servant named Georgina Hogg. There are several interesting components to her character. First of all, "Georgina" (like Caroline and Louisa, both in this novel) is a feminized version of what is essentially a masculine name. The use of these names is important. They imply that there are diffused or ambivalent identity problems at play. ("Edwina" in Loitering with Intent is the most masterful of these creations.) Georgina is described as being "like a lump of food on the chest which will move neither up nor down." (42) Her last name, "Hogg," is not only supposed to remind us of her pig-like nature, but, as Carl Jung said, "in the minds of many people, the pig is closely associated with dirty sexuality. (Circe, for example, changed the men who desired her into swine.)"⁴ In Allan Massie's opinion "...the name Hogg is not arbitrarily chosen. It refers us to James Hogg and The Confessions of a Justified Sinner, that most remarkable analysis of the consequences of erecting false gods and following their teaching. For, from the beginning, Muriel Spark recognizes that it is not just a choice between indifference and true religion. There is also false religion, seductive and destroying. The name Hogg is a warning; it takes us into that world which so many of her characters will inhabit."⁵ Georgina, therefore,

is the focus of several patterns which Spark creates in order to re-invent reality. She has a suggestive name, she is a mastering servant, her sexuality is confused, and so on.

The subplot in The Comforters revolves around a "phoney Baron" and two characters named "Hogarth." Clearly, using the name of the eighteenth-century British portraitist here was not unintentional, particularly since the first name of one of Spark's "Hogarth" characters is Mervyn, reminiscent of the name Merlin. The magical qualities suggested by Merlin are associated here with the Hogarth characters. And in this book Spark's sexually confused character is a crossdressing homosexual named Ernest who is self-indulgent and effete. He is the antithesis of the seriousness which his name suggests.

[Helena Manders] thought how Caroline with her aptitude for 'placing' people in their correct historical setting had once place Ernest in the French court of the seventeenth century.

'He's born out of his time,' Caroline had explained, 'that's part of his value in the present age,' Lawrence had said placidly, and not long ago, 'Ernest never buys a tie, he has them made.

Five-eighths of an inch wider than anyone else's.' (133)

The point here is that confused sexuality is aligned with suggestive names and interesting questions about time. Creativity and identity are problematic in such a world and both suggest the disorder and chaos which invade the worlds of Spark's characters in New York, London, Italy and elsewhere. The creative characters, the writers and artists, attempt to impose order, to make sense of flux and pattern from randomness. Caroline Rose is the first of Spark's female

characters to suffer the pain of confusion and, as Nancy A. J. Potter has noted, she is

engaged in finding a spiritual peace by recourse to various "comforters"--a lover, his family, St. Philumena's retreat house, her artistic friends, and, finally, her will. Her progress is impeded by concentrations of improbable and melodramatic obstacles: mysterious voices, talk of Black Masses, diamond smuggling gangs, and [the] disgusting...Mrs. Hogg.⁶

Caroline, like many of the females who follow her in later novels, is surrounded by the supernatural and the suspicious--the water which engulfs Georgina Hogg, the blackmailers who surface repeatedly in Spark's work to suggest the elusiveness of the dependable. As with January Marlowe, the writer character in Robinson, there is also turmoil within; it is not only the external circumstances which pose the problem. Spark suggests that Caroline's conversion to Catholicism mirrors her other profane attempts to locate the stable and unfluctuating. But she is surrounded; she hears voices, her typewriter is a plagiarizing novelist, the other characters are cripples (emotional and physical), satanists, phoney unctious Catholics--all contained by a world that is populated by false or useless comforters.

A completely different twist on the artist character emerges in Spark's 1968 novel, The Public Image, written two years after her much-debated and longest work, The Mandelbaum Gate. Spark researched her 1966 novel about Barbara Vaughn, a half-Jewish, half-Protestant convert to Catholicism while she was covering the Eichmann trial in Israel for the British press in 1961. The novel won the James Tail

Black Memorial Prize in 1966 but as Spark herself and many other critics (with the glaring exception of Patricia Stubbs) have noted, "It's out of proportion: the beginning is slow; the end is very rapid."⁷ Fortunately, she realized that the spareness and economy which define her genius, the liveliness of style and fast pace, were buried by an overflow of words. "I got bored," she said, "because it was too long, so I decided never again to write a long book. Keep them very short."⁸

Spark took her own advice in The Public Image, a spare and brittle novel with the hollow spaces and reverberating echoes suggested by a symbol which appears often in the novel--a shell. Annabel Christopher, a puny...English girl from Wakefield, with a peaky face and mousey hair,"⁹ has been transformed through the manipulation of the movie director, Luigi Leopardi, into the "English Lady-Tiger" of the film world in "Italy, the Motherland of Sensation." (24) Annabel is an actress of sorts and in this role she is another artist figure in Spark's canon. But unlike Caroline Rose and Fleur Talbot, who attempt to create reality through the act of writing books and giving birth to fictional characters, Annabel is initially someone else's creation who is "acted upon" and created by Leopardi and Frederick Christopher, her husband.

Annabel, the former waitress in a coffee-bar, "a little chit of a thing," (7) is an unusual female character for Spark. She is, in fact, "stupid, [with]...the deep core of stupidity that...thrives on the absence of looking glass," (9) who has somehow "fallen on her feet..." (6) She has none of the plodding dullness of other witless women in Spark's work and she has none of the emasculating energy of

Spark's vipers. What she understands is that "she did not need to be clever, she only had to exist..." (11); she did not need to perform." (11) "She thought of appearances in this way, they were 'roles'..." (21) and she understood that the public image would inevitably replace the private truth. "Annabel has become so identified with her movie star image as the 'English Lady-Tiger' that reality no longer exists. She has become a well-produced, self-created artifact, falsifying her memoirs in the manner of her own popular films."¹⁰ The "problem as to whether or not other people are 'real or illusory' has particular relevance" here."

The mastermind behind Annabel's image, a precursor of Lister in Not To Disturb, is her husband Frederick, who is angry, envious and manipulative. Frederick becomes so incensed by Annabel's success that he carefully orchestrates both his own suicide and a fake orgy at Annabel's apartment in order to discredit her and to destroy the "public image" he has worked so hard to create. He jumps from a scaffold at the Church of St. John and St. Paul, scene of Paul's martyrdom, while Annabel is bearing the intrusion of an assortment of film world gadflies, fashionable drug users and assorted hangers-on into her apartment in Rome. The apartment is large and empty of furniture but full of sounds--in many ways it too is a shell. Frederick hopes to deny Annabel the role of grieving widow/adoring wife so popular in Italy by implicating her in his morbid death. (Suicide is also illegal in Italy.) It was, said Annabel, "worse than a nightmare because it has been a reality, with a worse and heavier reality to follow and finish off the night with a thud on the floor of her mind. (47) But Annabel, schooled by the two men in replacing

reality with illusion, finds that she can become the orchestrator of a new public image. She proves, as Faith Pullin has noted, "the greater 'artist' of the two"¹² by galvanizing the neighbors "in attitudes of grief and sympathy for the press "just as successfully as if the scene had been studied and rehearsed for weeks." (68) She creates a fiction for the now-dead Frederick which makes him the accidental victim of a band of adoring fictitious women from whom he was supposedly trying to escape. The manipulated becomes the manipulator and Annabel emerges again the untainted and bereaved wife.

Frederick's alter ego here is a nasty betrayer-type named Billy O'Brien who attempts to blackmail Annabel through five maudlin and incriminating letters left behind by Frederick. The publication of these letters would force Annabel to discard the role which has now become reality and to adopt a new image. Annabel says, "It's the widowed Lady-Tiger or nothing," (101) and at the novel's end, she climbs back into her handy shell, foregoes the coroner's inquest, and takes her baby, Carl ("the only reality of her life") and leaves for the airport and "freedom."

She was pale as a shell. She did not wear her dark glasses.

Nobody recognized her as she stood, having moved the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas. (125)

Annabel Christopher has often been compared with Lise, the anti-heroine of Spark's next novel, The Driver's Seat. The difference is, however, marked. Lise is an identity-less wanderer, a chaotic and sick package in a plain wrapper. Annabel, perceived by the public as

an enticing, sexual vamp, is, underneath her image, the epitome of evenness and order. She is a contradiction even in sexual terms.

...in fact, I don't like tiger-sex. I like to have my sexual life under the bedclothes, in the dark, on a Saturday night.

With my nightdress on. I know it's kinky, but that's how I like it...And I don't like it upside down," she said. (101)

Muriel Spark, whose novels are a showcase for "kinky" sex, here transforms utterly "normal" sex into kinkyess. In a world where the unusual is the norm, the usual is abnormal.

Spark makes an additional statement about the function of the artist figure in the character of Frederick, a man who is personally offended by his wife's supposed "shallowness." He has two problems here: one is the recognition of Annabel's adaptability and the other is the acknowledgement of his own shortcomings. As a serious film-maker, Frederick wants to play God and in this pose he is closer to Jean Brodie, Lister and the Abbess Alexandra than he is to Miles Mary Robinson or Harvey Gotham, two other male artist figures in Spark's novels. What strikes the reader in the three male portraits of Robinson, Gotham and Christopher is the presence of a cold and detached intellect without the redeeming qualities of empathy and tenderness. Spark's masculine artist figures are detached, alienated, unsympathetic. When Frederick says of Annabel that she is "...a beautiful shell, like something washed up on the sea-shore, a collector's item, perfectly formed, a pearly shell---but empty, devoid of the life it once held," (12), he suggests his own persona.

Spark's view is that Annabel must divest herself of the carefully crafted "public image" in order to experience the "pregnant"

possibilities of reality; she must escape the confines of the carefully crafted shell of her public identity. This idea of an internal, suffocating structure is supported by a reiterated number pattern which Spark uses in Robinson (the number three) and in The Girls of Slender Means (the number five). In this novel the emphasis is again on the number three. Before Annabel's face-saving press conference, there are three neighbors in the apartment (65), there were three guests left after the party (a journalist, a forgotten girl asleep on the bathroom floor and a "small, sober, wiry Italian girl") (53); Gerda, an obnoxious daughter of the doctor who certifies Frederick's death, "stump[s] three steps closer to her mother as if to protect herself from Annabel," (64), the Christophers have moved back to Italy "at least for three years," (32) Annabel calls to check on her baby every three hours, (35) Frederick waits "three weeks form the release of [Annabel's] film" (20) to argue with her, and, finally, Frederick's funeral is at three o'clock. (108)

The number pattern intensifies the sense of entrapment, of the glaring artificiality of the "public image" in a hollow world with the fragile yet hard-baked surface of a shell.

Spark's first novel of the 80s, Loitering with Intent (1981) is a multilayered, cantilevered puzzle box, a kind of mirrored skyscraper demarcated by multiple levels of reality. Muriel Spark, the novelist, once again creates a novelist (here Fleur Talbot) who has written a book called Warrender Chase. So far, the pattern is familiar, a writer creating a writer. "Fleur takes a job helping the snobbish and, it transpires, spiritually predatory Sir Quentin Oliver to edit--indeed, to write--the memoirs of people who belong to his

Autobiographical Association."¹³ Obviously, no writer can write another person's autobiography but we now have a fictional writer (Fleur) writing fictionalized or improved accounts of the supposedly "real" lives of the Autobiographical Association members. Muriel Spark then explains that the Association members have rejected the "lives" with which Spark has endowed them and, with Sir Quentin's encouragement, appropriated the lives of the characters in Fleur's book. In fact, "...Sir Quentin uses a stolen proof of the novel as a blueprint"¹⁴ since he is dissatisfied with the prosaic "real" lives of his members. "'Life' plagiarizes art in Loitering with Intent,"¹⁵ and the members of Sir Quentin's circle, "a galere of the infirm and eccentric"¹⁶ (see Memento Mori) begin, one by one, to resemble the characters in Fleur's book, who are also sickly and zany. Sir Quentin, an evil impressario, (Fleur calls him "a psychological Jack the Ripper") eventually dies in an automobile crash as has the Warrender Chase of Fleur's novel.

The reader accepts the idea that we have a writer (Spark) who creates a writer (Fleur) who then creates a set of characters (in Warrender Chase) who exchange personalities with a set of characters in Spark's novel, Loitering with Intent. As a secondary theme there are two writers, (Spark and Fleur), looking back on their experience as writers, and in this sense the novel is a double memoir. Fleur Talbot is by now a successful novelist who is recalling the events surrounding the completion of her first novel, Warrender Chase, in 1950. Spark is loitering with the intent of understanding her own career. Loitering with Intent "clearly stands in (as it were) a multiple solipsistic relation to Muriel Spark's The Comforters,

published in 1957, which was about a character in a novel who has finished writing a study of the Novel and goes away to write a novel."¹⁷ Fleur claims that the entire account is true and it is symptomatic of Spark's genius that her fictional characters are believable as interpretators of reality. As Fleur says,

While I recount what happened to me and what I did in 1949, it strikes me how much easier it is with characters in a novel than in real life. In a novel the author invents characters and arranges them in convenient order. Now that I come to write biographically I have to tell of whatever actually happened and whoever naturally turns up. The story of a life is a very informal party; there are no rules of precedence and hospitality, no invitations.¹⁸

It is important to note that the reader accepts Fleur as "real" and also believes her assertions that her fictional Warrender Chase characters are easier to deal with than the fictional people of Spark's Loitering with Intent.

Both sets of characters (in Warrender Chase and in Loitering) have an irritating, jarring quality about them, even those who are more innocuous than Sir Quentin. Velma Richmond says that "the novel presents an unmistakably Sparkian combination of peculiar characters, grotesques whose human frailties are exposed but also tolerated...until they become...menacing and dangerous."¹⁹ Fleur says that Warrender Chase is "privately a sado-puritan who for a kind of hobby gathered together a group of people specially selected for their weakness and folly, and in whom he carefully planted and nourished a sense of terrible and unreal quiet." (59) Sir Quentin, of course, a

lunatic manipulator, does the same thing with the Association members since he is Chase's mirror image. He plays Providence with the lives of others and in this is reminiscent of Jean Brodie.²⁰ But his members, unlike Brodie's students, are all mildly deranged, depressed, dyspeptic or dotty. (Naturally, Fleur's friend, who is married to Fleur's bisexual lover, is named "Dottie." Dottie's husband's lover is a colorless, anxious poet by the name of Gray Mauser.) Again, the names are suggestive and they reinforce Spark's message. There is, too, a self-serving and vicious female housekeeper, Beryl Tims, descended from Georgina Hogg (The Comforters) and Mabel Pettigrew (Memento Mori). They are all mastering servants, although they are less machiavellian and sinister than Lister in Not to Disturb. Mastering servants are a Sparkian reminder that reality becomes increasingly tenuous as the social order and the concomitant role definitions break down. The only entrancing and lovable character is Sir Quentin's mother, Lady Edwina, who is sure of nothing, including her bladder control, which is undependable at best. Edwina serves as Spark's symbol of reversal or contrariety in this novel. She is incontinent and apparently senile but Fleur recognizes that Edwina is the only clear-sighted character in the group. She is also the oldest character, but with courtesy of a shrewd Justice she outlives her vile and vindictive son.

Loitering with Intent is a central novel in the study of Spark's work. What is happening in the evolution of Muriel Spark is that all the patterns, i.e., suggestive names, sexual deviates, mastering servants, litanies, writer and artist characters, emerge in this work. They are interwoven by Spark with her thematic concerns, i.e.,

identity, reality, creativity, sexuality. The patterns speak to the issue of technique, of how Spark does what she does. The themes exemplify Spark's concerns throughout her career from The Comforters to the present.

Spark's latest novel, The Only Problem (1984) uses for its central character another writer, this time a Canadian male, Harvey Gotham. Harvey has money so he can afford to spend his days ruminating about the plight of Job, the archetypal sufferer, and his false and unfeeling comforters. (As noted, Spark's first novel also alluded to this story.) Gotham is writing a monograph on the Book of Job since for him "the only problem" worth addressing is the dichotomy between a supposedly benevolent God and the "unspeakable sufferings of the world."²¹

Harvey, of course, identifies with Job; he too has problems: he has an amateur terrorist for a wife (she is also an adultress), a lover, (his wife's sister), who goes off with the father of his wife's illegitimate child and so on. He is a man with no answers, but with plenty of questions, holed up in a little cottage in St. Die, France. What he wants now is solitude, privacy and access to George de La Tour's sublime painting, "Job Visited by his Wife" which is housed in a museum at Epinal, a nearby town.

Harvey Gotham is one of Spark's most committed writers but he differs from her other artist characters in a significant way. He is an observer, not part of the problem or the solution. He is "in fact,...a scholar, a fundamentalist; he is a man who questions and who is at the same time resigned--perhaps stoically, at any rate

impassively, resigned--to receiving nothing in the way of affirmation, however serious the inquiry."²²

He does not expect answers because he knows there is no explanation for the suffering of Job-- only acceptance of the fact. "As Emerson said of the fall of man, 'It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped.'"²³ And so he spends his days speculating about God's actions regarding Job and Job's submission to his suffering:

...what was the answer to Job's question: Job's question was, why does God cause me to suffer when I've done nothing to deserve it? Now, Job was in no doubt whatsoever that his sufferings came from God and from no other source. The very rapidity with which one calamity followed upon another, shattering Job's world, leaving him destitute, bereft and sick all in a short space of time, gave dramatic evidence that the cause was not natural but supernatural. The supernatural, with power to act so strongly and disasterously, could only, in Job's mind, be God. And we know he was right in the context of the book, because in the Prologue, you read specifically that it was God who brought up the subject of Job to Satan; it was God, in fact, who tempted Satan to torment Job, not Satan who tempted God." (107)

Like the biblical man, Harvey is visited by a succession of comforters, all of whom interrupt his peace and invade the emotional space which he has constructed as a silent wall between him and the world. (Muriel Spark has said in an interview that she lives on the continent because she has too many friends in England.)

The first visitor is another artist figure, Harvey's brother-in-law, Edward Jansen, the ex-cleric, now an actor who needs money. Edward is a role player who says that he "knows when [he's] playing a part and when [he's] not. It isn't every actor who knows the difference. The majority act better off stage than on." (17) Once again Spark is introducing the idea that the line between reality and appearance is thin; Edward re-invents himself every few years and he has now realized that he acted the part of a curate as a curate.

In...days [past] Edward had been a curate, doing so well with church theatricals that he was in demand from other parishes up and down the country. It wasn't so very long before he realized he was an actor, not a curate, not a vicar in bud. (26)

He currently sees himself in the role of advocate for Harvey's wife, Effie, the sometime terrorist who is pregnant by an electronic salesman named Ernie Howe. (The electronics industry is responsible for the current profusion of duplicating devices so prevalent in Spark's work which once again point out the difference between reality and illusion.) Effie wants a divorce and as large a settlement as she can get; she thinks she deserves it since Harvey left her on the Autostrada when she stole two large chocolate bars from a snackbar as social protest. Effie is pure Muriel Spark because she is a reversal of our expectations. No one expects a studious, serious scholar like Harvey to be married to an impulsive, counter-culture type. Harvey is a man locked in the past, of the Old Testament; Effie is a woman committed to destroying the past. Her underground name is Marion, (a derivative of Mary!), she belongs to the Front de la Liberation de l'Europe which plans to free Europe from capitalism by bombing

supermarkets. She is Spark's nomination for one of the beautiful people of the current scene whose moral sense is ugly, if topical. In an telephone interview with Herbert Mitgang, Spark admitted that Effie is an Italian Red Brigade type. She said that "terrorism sometimes begins with a generosity of spirit, but some people have built-in violence--almost as though there were a terrorist chromosome."²⁴ Nobody can sympathize with the real terrorists. In other words, Spark understands that violence is sometimes unrelated to causes, it is arbitrary, and in some people, innate.

Effie is a political dilettante--she plays at liberation, scurrying around the continent causing trouble and protesting the artificiality of life, of which she is a distinct part. Life as a terrorist for her is a game and a role to play; she is similar in that sense to Edward. They are activists; Harvey is reclusive and passive. But Spark suggests that even passive people "...have an effect on the natural greenery around them regardless of whether they lay hands on it or not; some people...induce fertility in their environment and some the desert, simply by psychic force." (14) Harvey is the type of modernist hero who creates a desert.

Ruth, sister of Effie, is the next visitor. She brings with her Effie's baby girl, Clara. (Velma Richmond points out that "Clara...means light.")²⁵ She replaces her sister as Harvey's "wife." (This is ironic in view of the 'levirate law' of Deuteronomy 25:5-6) [which says that] if a man died childless, his nearest kinsman was obligated to marry the widow and to consider the first born son as the dead man's heir."²⁶ Instead of Harvey being replaced by a brother,

Effie is replaced by a sister. In Jewish tradition, The Story of Ruth is the tale of the faithful follower and this Ruth follows Effie.

Ruth is a religion lover; it is "her bread and butter," (51) and, like many of Spark's female characters, she seems attracted to detached, ascetic, religious types who are not noticeably interested in sex. But she is not all generosity of spirit. She reminds Harvey that the wife of Job suffered, "...But whoever wrote the book made nothing of her. Job deserved all he got.'" (51)

Ruth wants to be rid of Edmund now that he is an actor and she seems curiously satisfied to live for awhile in a chateau which Harvey buys, while he works in a simple cottage near the gate. Ruth is a comforter; she stays out of Harvey's way, is his sometimes mistress and takes care of Clara. "'You feel safer when you're living with someone who's in the God-business,'" (49) Harvey tells her. She soon leaves for an escapade with the same Ernie Howe who has impregnated her sister. So Harvey, in a sense, becomes Edward, Ruth replaces Effie with both Harvey and Ernie, and Edmund, her husband, has previously slept with Effie. In other Spark novels, her artist characters (see The Comforters, Loitering) become characters in the fictional world which they create. To some degree in The Only Problem, the characters are distorted reflections or doubles of each other.

Ruth and Effie look alike, and they both look like Job's wife as depicted in de La Tour's painting. Job's wife wears a turban; in the painting she leans over her troubled husband. When Effie lies dead in a Paris morgue, "her turbaned head [is] bent at the same inquiring angle as that of Job's wife in the La Tour picture in Epinal."²⁷ This

kind of doubling is a consistent pattern in the novels of Muriel Spark.

Harvey has other visitors--Nathan Fox, an androgynous type who likes housework, babysitting, who is in love with Effie, and was a student of Ruth's. He has a degree in English literature which has apparently prepared him to do nothing. Nathan, too, has an interesting biblical name since in Hebrew, Nathan is "Nahum," a name which means "A comforter."²⁸ In the Old Testament he is the prophet sent by God to rebuke David for his behavior with Bathsheba. Nathan Fox arrives during the Harvey-Edward-Ruth episode but he is less an administer against sin than an audience for it. Maybe Spark is saying that we are too immured in absurdity for effective rebuke.

There are visits from Harvey's English lawyer, Stewart Cowper, after Effie is arrested for killing a Parisienne gendarme and the police arrive to question Harvey about his possible involvement. Even Aunt Pet, resident of Toronto, who is interested in family honor, not the suffering of Job, arrives. The point here is that Harvey Gotham, like Job, is besieged, and that the threads of his closely woven existence are unraveling. He seems powerless to stop the onslaught and becomes a character in an unfinished morality play about innocence and guilt, and good and evil. Gotham is experiencing firsthand the nature of suffering. He is, in fact, losing his sense of self, partly through his identification with Job, a man beset and bereaved, and through his spectacular neglect of material things, which is making the role of isolated thinker more familiar. He is "endlessly speculative and obsessed"²⁹ like Job, who, Harvey says, "...not only argued the problem of suffering, he suffered the problem of argument.

And that is incurable." (32) Harvey is insistent that Edward visit the crocodiles at the London zoo to confirm that the eyes of these "leviathans of Job" open vertically. (Harvey says that "It is written of Leviathan 'his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning,'") (69) and the problem of "seeing," of understanding, becomes pervasive.

Unfortunately, Harvey is not as intrinsically interesting a character as those previously created by Spark. "...there is something attenuated about her rendition of Harvey's story. Her reluctance to probe her characters' psyches and motives is carried to an extreme here, as is her penchant for obliqueness..."³⁰ Like many modernist characters, Harvey is offended by an intrusive society, he suffers from a self-imposed loneliness and a total identification with the role of victim, of man in contemporary society beset by the indignities of potential chaos. For instance, he thinks the police will not raid a house if they believe a baby is inside, so he hangs baby clothes on a clothesline outside his cottage. An additional advantage is that it will deter "well-meaning women" from approaching him. Spark's characters like to find ways to be protected from the attractions of the opposite sex. (Caroline Rose in The Comforters can't sleep with her boyfriend anymore because she is now a Catholic; January Marlowe in Robinson picks one man to talk to on an airplane so the others will lose interest, and so on.)

However, if Harvey Gotham is not the colorful, quirky maladjusted male we are used to in Spark, he is persistent, honest and thoughtful--all qualities highly valued in characterizations by Spark. His friends and his comforters add to his burden; they have no answers to the agonizing and insolvable questions which consume him. "...it

is the very nature of friendship to prove inadequate to the demands of prolonged catastrophe."³¹ The more intrusive they become, the more immersed Harvey Gotham becomes in the inexplicable puzzle of Job. Finally, after three years of work on his monograph, the return of the pregnant Ruth with the child, Clara, and the death of Effie, Harvey emerges from his emotional retreat as Job emerged from his pain to live "one hundred forty years in the Lord's blessing (42:12-17)."³² Harvey's epiphany is that "the Book of Job will never come clear. It doesn't matter; it's a poem"; (127) it is inscrutable. This seems to be a comment by Spark on much of contemporary life--the terrorists without and the terror within, the fragmenting sense of self, the inability to connect the individual with the universal experience. Velma Richmond says that "Spark balances Harvey's precise, studious analysis of the pivotal text of the Bible with the bizarre and disturbing details of modern life in which instability of personal relations and acts of terrorism are commonplace."³³ "...The only problem, human suffering, has not and will not change."³⁴

The Only Problem is a reflection of the mature vision of Muriel Spark. It was published twenty years after The Comforters, a novel in which Spark originally contemplated the nature of suffering and the failure of the sufferer to be comforted. This is a sad and somber novel; it leaves the religious reader to depend on faith, without evidence that the suffering represented by Job will dissipate in the foreseeable future. For the reader without a committed and positive religious outlook, it is Muriel Spark's subtle reminder that faith and devotion saved both Harvey Gotham and Job. Without these virtues the

twentieth century individual becomes, inevitably, one of the worthless and unknowing comforters.

NOTES

CHAPTER SIX

- ¹ A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, 1973), 194.
- ² Tom Hubbard, "The Liberated Instant: Muriel Spark and the Short Story," in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble books, 1984), 179.
- ³ Muriel Spark, The Comforters (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1957), 176. All other entrees denoted by page number in parentheses in text.
- ⁴ Carl Jung, Man and His Symbols (New York: Dell Books, 1976), 343.
- ⁵ Allan Massie, "Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark," in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 98.
- ⁶ Nancy A. J. Potter, "Muriel Spark: Transformer of the Commonplace," Renascence 17 (1965), 115.
- ⁷ Dictionary of Literary Biography 599.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Muriel Spark, The Public Image (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 7. All other entrees denoted by page number in parentheses in text.
- ¹⁰ Faith Pullin, "Autonomy and Fabulation in the Fiction of Muriel Spark," in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 72.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 71.
- ¹² Ibid., 72.
- ¹³ Jeremy Treglown, "A Literary Life," Times Literary Supplement (May 22, 1981), 36.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 36.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸Muriel Spark, Loitering with Intent (England: Triad/Granada, 1982), 43. All other entrees denoted by page number in parentheses in text.

¹⁹Velma Richmond, "The Darkening Vision of Muriel Spark," Critique 15 (1973), 156.

²⁰Judy Little, Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 177.

²¹Muriel Spark, The Only Problem (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 22. All other entrees denoted by page number in parentheses in text.

²²Anita Brookner, "How Effie Made Him Suffer," The New York Times Book Review. 15 July, 1984, 1.

²³Annie Dillard, Living by Fiction (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1982), 75.

²⁴Brookner, 1.

²⁵Richmond, 173.

²⁶Buckner B. Trawick, The Bible As Literature: The Old Testament and the Apocrypha (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 298.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Christopher P. Andersen, The Name Game (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) 40.

²⁹Joan Philpott, Ms Magazine (1984), 80.

³⁰Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times (June 26, 1984), 34.

³¹Brookner, 1.

³²Richmond, 171.

³³Ibid., 175.

³⁴Ibid., 176.

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