

PRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION: MURIEL SPARK'S GRAVE HUMOUR

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‘Absolutely perfect ... A pass back there – a foul tackle and the whistle ... the sun has come out, everything looks *absolutely perfect* with the red coats of the band ... that feeling of – of tenseness ... and now again for the second half ... the first dramatic ... absolutely perfect ... it’s a *corner*, a goal to Manchester City ... a beautiful, absolutely ...’ (TC, 172)

Well, it is Saturday afternoon so I thought I’d start with a footballing moment. That clip comes from Muriel Spark’s first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), the moment when Louisa Jepp listens to her grandson, Laurence Manders, a sports commentator with the BBC: ‘Louisa Jepp sat beside the wireless cuddled in the entranced carcass of Laurence’s voice’ (TC, 172). Not the carcass of the radio, mind, the ghost in the machine, but the ‘entranced carcass’ of voice, this peculiar language. This match commentary dates from the year the novel was published, but could be from any given Saturday.

When I think of Spark, I think of that film *Frequency* with Dennis Quaid, where broadcasts from the past break into the present, and of radio waves in outer

space. Spark liked the radio, the wireless, as it was called. Religion came to her through the radio. A Jewish father, Presbyterian (multi-faith/toleration) schooling, conversion to Catholicism at 36, in her youth, she says, ‘I had no specific religion but at the same time I had a strong religious feeling. There were times when, listening to lovely music on the radio... I was aware of a definite “something beyond myself”’ (*CV* 115). And in her note to the collection of her radio plays and stories entitled *Voices at Play* (1961; 1966), she confessed: ‘I never quite grasped the distinction between dramatic features and plays except to discern what was in my favour, namely the freedom to do as I pleased with characters and voices without thought of conforming to a settled category. I turned my mind into a wireless set and let the characters play on my ear’ (*VAP* 7). Being watched or overheard is a recurrent theme in Spark’s work, often linked to blackmail and paranoia. It’s a truism that all biography is autobiography, and as a biographer of Emily Bronte and Mary Shelley, Spark certainly got under the skin of her subjects. She was reading *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* avidly in the 1950s and it shows in her own ‘Gothical’ style. In the preface to the revised 1988 edition of her 1951 biographical study of Shelley, Spark remarked: ‘On first reading through my work after so many years, I was amused to perceive that my prose style had taken on a touch of Mary Shelley’s. Through my experience as a writer of fiction I know now that I have a “writer’s ear,” that it is the act of imaginatively getting under the skin of a character that produces the individual character’s diction. But I recall when I first wrote the book that I was very careful not to make it novelistic. I have always disliked the sort of biography which states “X lay on the bed and watched the candle flickering on the roof beams,” when there is no evidence that X did so’ (*MS* xii). ‘Evidence’ is an important word for Spark, a word she applied to her quest for truth in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae* (1994), much

to the consternation of her readers. As Janice Galloway exclaimed, ‘What sort of mind seeks out “evidence” as appropriate for the “memory lane” part of one’s past?’ (*DLL*). Spark’s version of memory lane is more like a mugger’s alley, where you’re as likely to get brained by a cobblestone as have an epiphany.

Lawrence Manders, the sports commentator, has the habit of noticing absurd details: ‘In his childhood he had terrorized the household with his sheer literal truths.

“Uncle Ernest uses ladies’ skin food, he rubs it on his elbows every night to keep them soft” ... “Eileen has got her pain” ... “Georgina Hogg has three hairs on her chin when she doesn’t pull them out. Georgina has had a letter from her cousin which I read”.

These were memorable utterances. Other items which he aired in the same breath, such as, “There’s been a cobweb on the third landing for two weeks, four days and fifteen hours, not including the time for the making” – these were received with delight or indifference according to mood, and forgotten’ (*TC* 10).

Spark too has an eye and ear for detail, embarrassing and arcane, and for catching an idiom, a type. She wrote twenty-two novels between *The Comforters* in 1957 and *The Finishing School* in 2004. For convenience sake, these novels could be divided into three broad groups, by chronology rather than content: the eight that she wrote between 1957 and 1965: *The Comforters* (1957), about a Catholic convert haunted by a talking typewriter, *Robinson* (1958), a modern feminist rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Memento Mori* (1959), blackmail and desire among the elderly but firm, *The*

Bachelors (1960), men about town keeping open bed on a Sunday, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), the devil in charge of human resources, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), the fascism of everyday life, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), mayhem in a women's hostel, and *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), Miss Brodie in Jerusalem. This first flurry, eight novels in eight years, includes her best-known work – *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* – known now as much for Maggie Smith's performance in the 1969 film adaptation. The success of *Jean Brodie* is a double-edged sword because it has taken attention away from Spark's other work. One example: a year after *Jean Brodie* appeared, Spark had a play staged in London entitled *Doctors of Philosophy* (1963), much to the puzzlement and perplexity of reviewers – Kenneth Tynan called it a cross between late T. S. Eliot and adolescent Iris Murdoch. Think *Top Girls* meets *Lady Windermere's Fan*. It is vintage Spark, bubbly as a witches' brew, yet it doesn't appear to have enjoyed a revival. It's also about women and education among other things, and it's also brilliant, yet it's sunk without a trace. If only we had a theatre company brave enough to revive it. My own personal favourite in this first flurry of fiction, *Memento Mori*, seems to me more relevant than ever now, yet it's not as widely known as it should be.

Some see *The Mandelbaum Gate*, a big, bustling novel about the Arab-Israeli conflict among other things, as a flawed if not a failed experiment – an overreaching attempt at political fiction – that opened the way for the second phase in Spark's novel writing, those seven books that she wrote between 1968 and 1979. This was her long-term admirer John Updike's view when he said that 'Since the ambitious "Mandelbaum Gate," Muriel Spark's novels have been short, brusque, bleak, harsh, and queer' (*CEOMS* 209). That can seem like fair comment – Updike is as sharp as a tack when he talks about Spark – but I would still want to defend *The Mandelbaum*

Gate as much more than the loose baggy monster it's come to be seen as. Spark called it her *Passage to India*, and it's every bit as good as E. M. Forster's classic. There are novels in Spark's canon, her corpus, that might be called 'conceits', 'diversions', or 'entertainments'. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Spark herself called *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* 'an entertainment'.

Still, the second phase of seven novels does appear to open another door, a door into the dark, beginning with *The Public Image* (1968), an odd take on fame and the film world, through *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Psycho* in reverse, *Not to Disturb* (1971), *Upstairs, Downstairs* with a vengeance, *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), *Zombies in New York*, think *The Others* meets *The Sixth Sense*, or *The Waste Land* meets *Peter Pan*, *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), the Watergate Scandal set in a convent, *The Takeover* (1976), an Italian romp about property and theft and the worship of Diana, up to *Territorial Rights* (1979), *Carry-On up the Canal* or *Mirth in Venice*. This list includes some of Spark's finest diamonds and stilettos – she said they were 'nearer to poetry, more my sort of thing' (TMS 215) – including her own favourite, *The Driver's Seat*, filmed in 1974 as *Identikit* with Elizabeth Taylor, Ian Bannen and Andy Warhol, with the memorable strap lines 'She drove them crazy and hoped for the worst', and 'Was she mad enough to plot her own murder?' (Oh yes!) and a poster showing Taylor sandwiched between two phallic structures, Big Ben and the leaning Tower of Pisa, and arguably her funniest book, *The Abbess of Crewe*, filmed as *Nasty Habits* with Glenda Jackson in 1977. I like *Territorial Rights*, it's a right carry-on, a caper – 'It may seem far-fetched to you, Anthea, but here everything is stark realism. This is Italy' – but still, the third and final wave of novels opens with what many would regard as a return to form after a slide of sorts.

This last grouping, those seven novels that Spark wrote between 1981 and 2004, are: *Loitering with Intent* (1981), shortlisted for the Booker Prize the year that Salman Rushdie won it with *Midnight's Children*, rewriting the lives of others in the Autobiographical Association, *The Only Problem* (1984), Spark's book-length engagement with the Book of Job, a touchstone text for her, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), talent and torment in London's literary underbelly, *Symposium* (1990), death on the menu at a dinner party and some nuns who practice Marxism and plumbing, *Reality and Dreams* (1997), another cock-eyed look at the world of cinema and celebrity, *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), two Lord Lucans and a stigmatic psychiatrist terrorist, and *The Finishing School* (2004), settling accounts on a creative writing course.

Loitering with Intent and *A Far Cry from Kensington* are the standouts in this list, both dealing with London literary life and the publishing world of the 1950s, set in the bedsit land around Kensington, a return in some ways to her earlier London novels, *The Bachelors* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. I get into trouble every time I call these books kitchen sink realism, because nobody has a kitchen sink like that in their house, but they are dense and involved and immersed in aspects of the everyday in ways that the slightly feverish and unhinged later works like *The Driver's Seat* and *The Hothouse* are not. There's an interview with Spark where Janice Galloway says that *Hothouse* features a family of 'persistent fantasists', but I find them much more frightening and forlorn than that. You can't get any older than dead, and although Spark's characters may from time to time imagine their own deaths it's more than mere fantasy in *The Hothouse*, which features a performance of *Peter Pan* with the Lost Boys played by old folk.

As well as these twenty-two novels, Spark wrote biographies, plays, poems, and short stories. A colleague said he thought Spark was actually a short story writer than a novelist. I felt that had to be a put-down. Having read the 41 tales in her *Complete Short Stories* I'm still disinclined to agree, but I can see the argument. There are certainly stories that do things the novels don't do, or don't do as dynamically, as dramatically. Like Alice Munro and Flannery O'Connor, Spark is special. One thing that comes through from the short stories is her obsession with the supernatural, which is there in the novels too, but not to the same extent. Spark's subtly surreal style was compounded by her experiences as a starving artist under the influence of Dexedrine, which she took as an appetite suppressant in 1954, the year of her conversion to Catholicism. It was, she said, 'a mad idea', out of which came mad ideas. But before the diet pills and the conversion came the 1951 *Observer* short story award for 'The Seraph and the Zambesi' (1951), already embroiled in ideas of what it is to be human, and what it is to be real.

In 1956, Spark published a short story in the *Glasgow Herald* entitled "'A Sad Tale's Best for Winter'". The opening lines run: 'There was a man lived by a graveyard. His name was Selwyn Macgregor, the nicest boy who ever committed the sin of whisky' (*TCSS* 326). That graveyard is gone by the end of the story – like Selwyn himself, who threw a handful of earth over his shoulder like salt at his aunt's funeral – 'levelled out ... to make a playground for the children' (*TCSS* 331). Graveyards are playgrounds of sorts for Spark. In her biography of Emily Bronte, which she considered her best piece of critical writing, Spark reminds readers that the parsonage 'overlooked the graveyard. Life bordered on death ... a perfect scenario' (*EB* 7). From the Brontes Spark got a strong sense of self-dramatization. Since I'm straying into influences here I should mention some of the Scottish ones: the ballads,

Hogg and Stevenson. Spark recalled: 'I was reading the Border ballads so repetitively and attentively that I memorized many of them without my noticing it. The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart' (CV 98). Spark once said: 'I write as a Scot and I write as a Catholic. I don't even have to think about it. That's there like your freckles you know.' If the ballads, Hogg and Stevenson are in the Scottish mix, then the wit of Evelyn Waugh and the gravity of Graham Greene are in the Catholic cast of her work.

So let's start in the cemetery, a good place to pass the time, and not just for the sake of shroud waving, or from some morbid fixation, but to get at that 'entranced carcass' of the human voice. In the next half hour or so I want to look at three cemetery scenes from Spark's writing, and I've put these on the handout. So cuddle up to the carcass. The first excerpt comes from *Memento Mori* (1959). The seed for this novel, about the ticking time bomb of old age, published in 1959 when Spark was forty-one, was planted when she was eight years old and her grandmother suffered a stroke and came to stay with her family, meaning that Muriel slept on the sofa. As she recalls, while her schooldays were full of poetry and the germ of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, her afterschool hours were occupied with her grandmother's homecare: 'my grandmother's new problems, created by her disabilities, made me acutely aware of old age, a condition of which of course I had been aware, hitherto, but which, up to now, had been totally outside our intimate family life. I think my experiences in minding and watching my grandmother formed a starting-point for my future novel, *Memento Mori*, in which the characters are all elderly people' (CV 91). One of the things Spark learned from watching her grandmother was how her memory worked, and more than that, how memory itself worked, a major motif in Spark's work: 'Before her stroke I had noticed how her memory worked. It came in snatches,

vignettes. I was beginning to practise memories myself' (CV, 91). Once, before a planned family trip to Cramond, Spark's grandmother had a panic attack, behaving like a 'trapped animal'. It emerged that she feared being put in a home, an idea that shocked the young Muriel: 'This had never been a question amongst us. In those days there were no national health services, and old people's homes existed only for the very rich and unwanted or the poor and destitute. We were all full of consternation that my grandmother should imagine we could treat her so badly. It made me realize how vulnerable the aged are. I think her inability to communicate gave her a sense of frustration, that the absence of exact information opened her mind to suspicions. Very often we had smiled at my grandmother's foibles and imaginings, but we didn't smile at this incident. It was difficult to recognize in her the former outspoken champion for the rights of women' (CV 93).

The passage I've chosen from *Memento Mori* begins with former housekeeper Jean Taylor (aged 82), visited in the geriatric ward by Dr Alec Warner (aged 79), a sociologist and gerontologist, an avid student of the ageing process, whom she has known for over fifty years. Jean has earlier described old age as 'like wartime', explaining: 'Being over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and the dying as on a battlefield' (MM 37). This war, the war waged against age can be a phoney war and a dirty war too, like the war that Spark herself fought when she came back from Africa in 1944, leaving her man in an asylum and her son in a convent, to work in counter-propaganda. (It was a book, Ivy Compton-Burnett's latest novel, *Elders and Betters* that proved Spark's passport into propaganda, though like Compton-Burnett Spark knew that elders were not necessarily betters – and betters weren't betters either).

In *Memento Mori*, in the Maud Long Medical Ward, Jean Taylor asks Alec Warner if he is the anonymous caller who's been threatening old folk, ringing them up and saying 'Remember you must die', before hanging up: '[Alec] did not seem to hear the question, but was watching Granny Barnacle like a naturalist on holiday. Granny Barnacle accepted his attention with obliging submission, as she did when the doctor brought the medical students round her bed, or when the priest brought the Blessed Sacrament' (MM 67). When Alec does finally answer Jean, distractedly, he admits that he may indeed 'be a Jekyll and Hyde, may I not?' Jean recalls that Alec had always had these 'doubts' about himself, and about others. And while sitting there, here, in the Maud Long Ward talking to Alec she slips into the past, into a double embedded memory. They'd once been lovers, Jean and Alec, earlier in the twentieth century, around 1907, and years after their relationship was over, in 1928, they took a walk together in the woods, where Alec asked, unexpectedly – this is the first passage on the handout: 'Do you think, Jean, that other people exist? ... that people – the people around us – are real or illusory?' Panicking – does she really know this man she's been intimate with? – Jean says 'What do you mean?' 'Only what I say', says Alec: 'They had come to a beech wood which was damp from last night's storm. Every now and then a little succession of raindrops would pelt from the leaves on to his hat or her hat. He took her arm and led her off the main path, so that for all her sober sense, it rapidly crossed her mind that he might be a murderer, a maniac. But she had, the next instant, recalled her fifty years and more. Were they not usually young women who were strangled in woods by sexual maniacs? No, she thought again, sometimes they were women of fifty-odd. The leaves squelched beneath their feet. Her mind flashed images to itself back and forth. But I know him well, he's Alec

Warner. Do I know him, though? – he is odd. Even as a lover he was strange. But he is known everywhere, his reputation ... Still, some eminent men have secret vices. No one ever finds them out; their very eminence is a protection' (*MM* 69).

Alec persists with his probing:

'Surely', he was saying, as he continued to draw her into the narrow, dripping shadows, 'you see that here is a respectable question. Given that you believe in your own existence as self-evident, do you believe in that of others? Tell me, Jean, do you believe that I for instance, at this moment, exist?' He peered down at her face beneath the brim of her brown felt hat.

'Where are you taking me?' she said, stopping still.

'Out of these wet woods,' he said, 'by a short cut. Tell me, now, surely you understand what I am asking? It's a plain question...'

She looked ahead through the trees and saw that their path was indeed a short cut to the open fields. She realized at once that his question was entirely academic and he was not contemplating murder with indecent assault. And what reason, after all, had she to suspect this? How things do, she thought, come and go through a woman's mind. He was an unusual man' (*MM* 69-70).

'I agree', she then said, 'that your question can be asked. One does sometimes wonder, perhaps only half-consciously, if other people are real'.

‘Please,’ he said, ‘wonder more than half-consciously about this question. Wonder about it with as much consciousness as you have, and tell me what is your answer.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I think in that case, other people do exist. That’s my answer. It’s only common sense.’

‘You have made your mind up too quickly,’ he said. ‘Take time and think about it.’

They had emerged from the wood and took a path skirting a ploughed field which led to the village. There the church with its steep sloping graveyard stood at the top of the street. Miss Taylor looked over the wall at the graveyard as they passed it. She was not sure now if his words had been frivolous or serious or both; for, even in their younger days – especially during that month of July 1907 at the farmhouse – she had never really known what to make of him, and had sometimes felt afraid.

She looked at the graveyard and he looked at her. He noted dispassionately that her jaw beneath the shade of the hat was more square than it had ever been. As a young woman she had been round-faced and soft; her voice had been extremely quiet, like the voice of an invalid. In middle age she had begun to reveal, in appearance, angular qualities; her voice was deeper; her jaw-line nearly masculine. He was interested in these factors; he supposed he approved of them; he liked Jean. She stopped and leaned over the low stone wall looking at the gravestones.

‘This graveyard is a kind of evidence’, she said, ‘that other people exist’.

‘How do you mean?’ he said.

She was not sure. Having said it, she was not sure why. The more she wondered what she had meant the less she knew.

He tried to climb over the wall, and failed. It was a low wall, but still he was not up to it. 'I am going on fifty,' he said to her without embarrassment, not even with a covering smile, and she remembered how, at the farmhouse in 1907, when he had chanced to comment that they were both past their prime, he being twenty-eight and she thirty-one, she had felt hurt and embarrassed till she realized he meant no harm by it, meaning only to point a fact. And she, catching this habit and tone, had been able to state quite levelly, 'We are not social equals,' before the month was over.

He brushed the dust of the graveyard wall from his trousers. 'I am going on fifty. I should like to look at the gravestones. Let's go in by the gate.'

And so they had walked among the graves, stooping to read the names on the stones.

'They are, I quite see, they are,' he said, '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.'

'Of course,' she said, 'the gravestones might be hallucinations. But I think not.'

'There is that to be considered,' he said, 'so courteously that she became angry.'

'But the graves are at least reassuring,' she said, 'for why bother to bury people if they don't exist?'

'Yes, oh precisely,' he said (*MM* 70-1).

Precisely. And there's the rub, headstones and hallucinations are the evidence of the graveyard. The greatest trick the Devil – or the Dame – ever pulled was convincing characters – and readers – they really exist. Because of course, neither Alec nor Jean are 'real people' – merely characters in a novel, ciphers (or 'cybers') in a book, 'entranced carcasses'. Spark questions the very basis of human character, in and out of books. Here, in a couple of pages, she sketches a lifelong relationship, then erases it. In *Memento Mori*, the phrase 'sinisters and bothers' is used by one elderly character instead of sisters and brothers (*MM* 25). It's a nice pun – and I like a pun as much as I like a podium – but it's also a fair description of the sinister and bothersome goings on in this novel and in Spark's writing as a whole. Is Alec just another tempter and seducer, another devil in disguise, leading his listener astray, asking academic questions, or does his question about existence go deeper, chiming with Spark's own attitude to character and reality, an illustration of her exaggerated realism? In *Doctors of Philosophy* one character explains: 'Reality is very alarming at first and then it becomes interesting. Are you interested in the nature of reality, Mrs S.?' (*DOP* 230). Mrs S. is the daily help, and at this point she's busy assembling the stage set, so yes, she's interested in reality.

The second cemetery scene comes from *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960). Taking Miss Merle Coverdale, aged 37, head of the typing pool, for a walk across the common of the Rye, the devilish Dougal Douglas declares: 'My lonely heart is deluged by melancholy and it feels quite nice' (*BPR* 29). Miss Coverdale cautions him against such airy talk, but Dougal is not shy about expressing his views. He tells her she is 'a terror and a treat' and reminds him of an Okapi, explaining: 'An okapi is a rare beast from the Congo. It looks like a little deer, but it tries to be a giraffe. It has stripes and it stretches its neck as far as possible and its ears are like a donkey's. It is a

little bit of everything. There are only a few in captivity. It is very shy' (*BPR* 30).

This unorthodox chat-up line is actually a ruse to get Miss Coverdale to confess to her affair with Mr Druce, boss of the firm. Dougal already knows about it – 'I've got second sight' – but wants it straight from the Okapi's mouth. Dougal tends to get what he wants. And like Alec Warner his special subject is the nature of the human creature. Asked 'How's life?' he replies 'It exists' (*BPR* 103). This is the second passage on the handout:

He brought [Miss Coverdale] to the gate of the park and was leading her through it, when she said.

'This doesn't lead anywhere. We'll have to go back the same way.'

'Yes it does,' Dougal said, 'it leads to One Tree Hill and two cemeteries, the Old and the New. Which would you prefer?'

'I'm not going into any cemetery,' she said, standing with legs apart in the gateway as if he might move her by force.

Dougal said, 'There's a lovely walk through the New Cemetery. Lots of angels. Beautiful. I'm surprised at you. Are you a free woman or are you a slave?'

She let him take her through the cemetery, eventually, and even pointed out to him the tower of the crematorium when it came into sight. Dougal posed like an angel on a grave which had only an insignificant headstone. He posed like an angel-devil, with his hump shoulder and gleaming smile, and his fingers of each hand widespread against the sky. She looked startled. Then she laughed (*BPR* 30).

Dougal is a devil who likes to delve into the dinkety details of people's private lives like a pig after truffles. 'There's no good telling the half and then stopping', he tells Miss Coverdale, pressing her for the whole story (31).

The angel-devil Dougal is of course a sexual being. It's part of his 'human research':

Dougal put his long cold hand down the back of her coat. She was short enough for his hand to reach quite a long way. He tickled her.

She wriggled and said, 'Not in broad daylight, Dougal.'

'In dark midnight,' Dougal said, 'I wouldn't be able to find my way.'

She laughed from her chest. (32)

She doesn't laugh when Mr Druce takes a corkscrew to her throat, but then few readers do, and nobody does murder most foul, most frightening, quite like Spark. She is brutal. But she's also amazingly tender. The death of Granny Trotsky in *Memento Mori*, or the sifting through personal effects of the Polish dressmaker Wanda Podolak, hounded to her grave by racial harassment in *A Far Cry*, are priceless passages.

The third tête-à-tête among the headstones comes from *Loitering with Intent* (1981), which opens with aspiring writer Fleur Talbot penning some verses: 'One day in the middle of the twentieth century I sat in an old graveyard which had not yet been

demolished, in the Kensington area of London, when a young policeman stepped off the path and came over to me. He was shy and smiling, he might have been coming over the grass to ask me for a game of tennis. He only wanted to know what I was doing but plainly he didn't like to ask. I told him I was writing a poem, and offered him a sandwich which he refused as he had just had his dinner himself. He stopped to talk awhile, then he said good-bye, the graves must be very old, and that he wished me good luck and that it was nice to speak to somebody.

This was the last day of a whole chunk of my life but I didn't know that at the time. I sat on the stone slab of some Victorian grave writing my poem as long as the sun lasted' (*LWI*, 1).

Around 1949, Spark had written a poem entitled 'Elegy in a Kensington Churchyard', and two years dusted down another verse, 'The Grave that Time Dug'. She later recalled, 'I was destined to poetry by all my mentors' (*CV* 64). Poetry and the police are familiar features of Spark's writing. Her 1963 Kafkaesque story, 'The Thing About Police Stations' is one of many places where she dwells on the nature of the police not as symbols of authority but as phantoms or pitiable creatures.

In each of these three scenes there is the question of a prime, as well as something primal. There is also death (personified as well as philosophised), memory, and time, all preoccupations of Spark's. She practically invented the idea of a 'prime', a time when one is in one's prime, and in the case of Miss Jean Brodie, that prime, though cut short, was supposed to encompass the years from forty through to sixty. A

generous allowance for a woman, you might think, and better than Spark gives to her male characters, that ‘dangerous age of fifty’ that Lord Suzy is approaching in *Symposium*, that going on and on fifty that Alec Warner owns up to ‘without embarrassment, not even with a covering smile’ in that long double flashback in *Memento Mori*. Spark herself enjoyed a prime of more generous proportions still, publishing her last novel in her 86th year. In fact Spark, married and a mother by the time she was twenty, said in one interview that her own prime came in her sixties, and a few months before she died she revised that upwards, saying ‘these last years have been the happiest of my life.’ Miss Brodie is a good guide to primeness as against primness. As she tells her girls, the Brodie Set, on one of their walks: ‘These years are still the years of my prime. It is important to recognize the years of one’s prime, always remember that. Here is my tram-car. I dare say I’ll not get a seat. This is nineteen-thirty-six. The age of chivalry is past’ (10). But even in *Jean Brodie* this idea of ageing into authority and selfhood is an elastic one. There’s some give in it. First of all, Jean assures her set that they have this big window. Then she opens it up to allow for individual tailoring and timing. One’s prime is something one instinctively knows one’s in. Jean Brodie’s certainty about her own prime is coupled with an insistence that one’s prime is not a one size fits all affair: ‘I have frequently told you, and the holidays just past have convinced me, that my prime has truly begun. One’s prime is elusive. You little girls, when you grow up, must be on the alert to recognize your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur. You must then live it to the full’ (*PMJB* 11).

Spark had played with the idea of a prime time of life in her earlier work. *Memento Mori* is full of old folk apparently past their prime, yet Jean Taylor couldn’t help

thinking that ‘the time would surely come for everyone to be a government granny or grandpa, unless they were mercifully laid to rest in their prime’ (*MM*, 17-18). Spark spoke with affection in her autobiography of her own teachers at James Gillespie School – in Edinburgh – being in their prime when they taught her: ‘It was sixty years ago. The average age of those high-spirited and intelligent men and women who taught us was about forty; and they were in their prime. I cannot believe they are nearly all gone, past and over, gone to their graves, so vivid are they in my memory, one and all’ (*CV*, 76).

Phrases like the transfiguration of the commonplace, the desegregation of art, or fiction as lies, only scratch the surface, as I’ve done here. Academics might speak of the critique of the individual human subject and the deconstruction of the border between life and death, but Spark’s fiction delves into these matters without the jargon. I met Donny O’Rourke on University Avenue a couple of days ago and he said it was good that I was going to be talking about Spark because he wouldn’t have associated her aesthetic with my views. It seems I’m not her type. Donny was dead right. A false and shallow opposition means that Spark would generally be seen as on a different side of the fence than, say, James Kelman. One is hard-nosed, foul-mouthed, acid-tongued, fearless and socially engaged – and the other comes from Glasgow. Spark’s certainly a much-misunderstood writer, edgier and riskier than she’s often assumed to be. She’s really just your average Presbyterian Jewish Catholic African expatriate postmodernist paranoiac gothic writer. Nothing to see here. But those who dismiss so-called genre fiction in favour of what they fondly imagine to be more political forms have a gendered agenda. Give me the subtle, sophisticated, thought-through group-oriented critique of realism offered by Spark before any amount of individual – and individualist – male fantasies. I like my fiction with ice

and a slice, but as Spark says, ‘Seeing everyone’s point of view is a bit like mixing your drinks’ (*DOP* 272). It may smack of highballs and mothballs, but Spark’s writing has more balls than most of her grotty, sorry, gritty contemporaries. Kelman has dismissed Waugh and Eliot, though their writing remains rich and resonant. But rather than set up false oppositions it is better to see Spark’s ‘haughty and remote anarchism’ as cognate at some level with Kelman’s anarcho-individualism (both spring from small Scottish Protestant families from good areas with good educations). There’s no moralizing – no moralic acid – in Spark, no prolier-than-thou attitude. I’m open to all aesthetics except the aesthetic of bullying, the aesthetic that says my way of looking at the world is right and yours is wrong. That can go and fictionalize itself.

I started with snatches of football commentary from *The Comforters*. To bookend or goalpost this dig around Spark – headstones for goalposts – I want to finish with the closing lines of *Loitering with Intent*, where Fleur Talbot, Spark’s poet-turned-novelist, manages to get on the score sheet. We last saw Fleur in that Kensington graveyard, writing her poems before the police turned up. The novel ends with her – yes, in her prime: ‘having entered the fullness of my years’ – asserting her independence as an author, and reasserting a vital Sparkism, that writing is not an escape from real life but a rigorous examination of and engagement with the very idea of ‘real life’. In *The Only Problem*, Harvey Gotham, working on a new interpretation of the Book of Job while the world falls apart around him, insists as Spark did that writing is not a substitute for living but a way of thinking the relation between life and death: ‘that is experience, too; real experience, not vicarious, as is often assumed. To study, to think, is to live and suffer painfully’ (*TOP* 153). In *Doctors of Philosophy*, the childless scholar Leonora shakes the stage set to show just how flimsy reality is: ‘The scenery is unreliable’ (*DOP* 245). Back to the footie: In *Loitering with Intent*,

Fleur springs into action when accused of being a daydreamer: ‘The other day when I had looked in on Dottie, in her little flat, and had a row with her on the subject of my wriggling out of real life, unlike herself, I came out into the court-yard exasperated as usual. Some small boys were playing football, and the ball came flying straight towards me. I kicked it with a chance grace, which, if I had studied the affair and tried hard, I never could have done. Away into the air it went, and landed in the small boy’s waiting hands. The boy grinned. And so, having entered the fullness of my years, from there by the grace of God I go on my way rejoicing’ (*LWI* 172).

I’ll tell you one thing, a lot of writers kiss the badge and flatter to deceive but few are fit to lace Spark’s boots. If I were picking a Scottish Literature First XI the mercurial Muriel would be the first name on the team sheet. Absolutely perfect.