

CRIME AND CREATIVITY: THE ANTI-IMAGINATION NOVELS OF MURIEL SPARK

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I

There are two kinds of professionals who inhabit Muriel Spark's fictional world most conspicuously: creators and criminals. Each category can be both expanded and subdivided. On the one hand, her novels present quite a few novelists — Caroline Rose in *The Comforters* (1957), Charmian Colston in *Memento Mori* (1959), Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent* (1981), and Roland Mahler and Chris Wiley in *The Finishing School* (2004) — in addition to a variety of other artist figures, such as the poet Nicholas Farrington in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), the film director Tom Richards in *Reality and Dreams* (1996), the actress Annabel Christopher in *The Public Image* (1968), and the teacher Jean Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). On the other hand, there are crooks and outlaws of all degrees and types, including frauds, particularly of the religious kind, such as Patrick Seton in *The Bachelors* (1960), Hubert Mallindaine in *The Takeover* (1976), Hector Bartlett in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), and Beate Pappenheim in *Aiding and Abetting* (2000); thieves, ranging from petty voyeurs to bands of diamond smugglers; and both real and potential murderers, who appear in almost all her novels. The inevitable ancillaries of both professions also abound, in the form of editors, critics and “pisseurs de copie” (to use a phrase from *A Far Cry from Kensington*, meaning those who “urinate” worthless writing) to hover over the authors, as well as police officers and private detectives to investigate the criminals, and psychiatrists and psychologists to analyze their minds.

In fact, in Spark's novels, the two trades are not necessarily set opposite each other, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive: they sometimes so overlap or even blend with each other that they cannot be told apart. The truth is that many of Spark's characters are not only artists but also con artists of sorts. Her protagonists, the heroines in particular, are often equally endowed with the art of creation and that of deception. *The Comforters* presents Caroline, a psychologically unstable literary critic, who discovers that she is a character in a novel, as she starts hearing the sound of a typewriter and the voice of a disembodied author-narrator narrating the details of her life and person, and of those of everyone around her. As Caroline decides to confront and fight against this invisible controller of her destiny, the question arises as to who is indeed the originator and who the imitator. Is Caroline merely echoing and mirroring the words and actions written down by the author, or is the latter “plagiarizing” from her life? Gradually, however, she acquires enough cunning and wiliness to outsmart her invisible “rival”. In the end, she turns the tables on the invisible author and wins the metafictional battle over authority and authorship, by usurping the very novel in which she has been trapped as a puppet-character. The words of the unseen author, now outwitted and

exploited by Caroline, become incorporated into the pages of a novel that she publishes.

A very similar situation recurs in *Loitering with Intent*, in which Fleur, another young aspiring author, finds herself in the employ of Sir Quentin Oliver, a shady man in charge of a shady organization called the Autobiographical Association. Sir Quentin commissions Fleur as editor of the memoirs written by the ten members of the said organization, but she ends up doing much more than editing. She takes the materials (infinitely boring as they originally are) from the lives of these people, and weaves them into far more alluring and adventurous tales, reinventing the subjects themselves and transforming them into characters of her own creation. Meanwhile, Sir Quentin starts to consider Fleur a threat to his own nefarious plot, which is to blackmail the members of the association based on the secrets contained in their memoirs. Desperate, he tries to “steal” Fleur’s novel-in-progress by living the life of its protagonist, by virtually *becoming* him. “It was almost as if Sir Quentin was unreal and I had merely invented him,” says Fleur, “Warrender Chase being a man, a real man on which I had partly based Sir Quentin” (129). In the end, Sir Quentin is accidentally killed in a car crash, enacting the fictional Warrender’s destiny. Clearly, plagiarism is a crime punishable by nothing less than death in Spark’s fictional world.

In *The Finishing School*, Spark’s last work, tension and rivalry between Roland and Chris, a young teacher-novelist and his teenage student, mount as their relationship becomes filled with a mix of love, hate and jealousy. While Roland becomes increasingly obsessed with Chris’s creative talent and the novel he is in the process of writing, Chris comes to depend on Roland’s jealousy to fuel his own creative energy. Halfway into the novel Roland morbidly starts contemplating Chris’s murder, and in the climax, barely escapes being murdered himself by an equally distraught Chris. As far as Spark’s writers are concerned, the act of writing fiction is always, and quite literally, a matter of life and death. (It is also a matter of love: the ending of *The Finishing School* sees Roland and Chris being united in a same-sex marriage.)

If the actions and thoughts of Fleur and Sir Quentin seem to run parallel to each other, this is not at all an uncommon phenomenon in Spark’s fiction, for her creative figures often find themselves mirrored by the criminals they encounter. They seem aware, at least on the subconscious level, that these double-talking, forging, blackmailing, murderous villains are their doubles and doppelgangers to some extent. In *Aiding and Abetting*, Dr Hildegard Wolf, a vastly popular psychiatrist in Paris, is visited alternately by two suspicious male clients, who both claim to be the famous Lord Lucan, a real-life British aristocrat suspected of having murdered a nanny and battered his wife nearly to death, and who then fled in 1974 and has been hunted by the police ever since. She is both disgusted and fascinated by the two Lucans, who respectively call themselves Walker and Lucky, as she observes that they neither feel nor show any remorse for their bloody deeds committed in the past.

Hildegard is also frightened when she realizes that they have come to blackmail her for her own secret, buried past. Long ago, when she was a poor young student of psychology in Bavaria and was still called Beate Pappenheim, she had extracted money from the religious poor in Germany, England and Ireland by pretending to be a stigmatic, feigning the five bleeding wounds of Christ every month with her own menstrual blood. When this act of fraud was finally revealed, she fled abroad with her money, changed her name and finally settled in Paris. Nevertheless, Hildegard claims that she did, though inexplicably, work many a miracle back then, and that she is still capable of curing her clients now, although we strongly suspect that she is practicing without a proper license. Yet the question still hangs hauntingly in the air:

is she, ultimately, in the same bag as Lucky, who says: “I sold my soul to the Devil” (2, 54)?

So which Lucan *is* the real one? After Hildegard’s guess oscillates uncertainly between the two, we are finally told that Lucky is Lucan, and Walker his double. We are also informed that Lucky meets his end in Africa, where he falls prey to cannibalism (again, a very typical Sparkian ending), while Walker walks away, now useless and almost “identityless” now that Lucky is gone. But, we cannot help wondering after finishing the book, did it really matter which man was Lucan and which was not? There are few, if any, distinguishing features to separate them, except that one is an imitation of the other, and the swapping of their roles would have been equal to the swapping of their personalities. The question of identity and of identification is quite slippery in this novel, and is repeatedly brought up in relation to Lucan, as well as other characters. After Hildegard disappears from Paris to avoid being exposed by the Lucans, her lover Jean-Pierre searches for her frantically, but when he finally finds her at a hotel in London, he barely recognizes her because of her newly dyed hair. Also, Hildegard on the run catches sight of a woman who she thinks had been her accomplice back in her stigmatic days, only to realize immediately that this is impossible, for the woman in question should be far older by now than the one in front of her.

The trickiness of facial recognition is indeed a perpetual theme in Spark’s later novels, and is most probably connected to the deeper, even more elusive, question of our knowledge and understanding of the other. Hildegard, when confronted with Walker, mentions the possibility of Lucan having altered his face by plastic surgery, which will of course make it difficult even for his former acquaintances to recognize him. Raising this question, she says:

. . . I have also a photo-kit of what he should look like now, based on computer-devised photos of his parents at your age, and here is another identikit which allows for plastic adaptations to the jawbone and the nose. (45, omission mine)

Identi-Kit (as well as PhotoFit, mistakenly called photo-kit here), a facial reconstruction tool used by the police to help witnesses identify criminal suspects, figures repeatedly in Spark’s later novels. The concept of Identi-Kit, as almost everything else written about by Spark, acquires a metaphorical meaning worth exploring.

II

Identikit is how Spark spells it, even though the official name of the product is Identi-Kit. It was invented by Smith and Wesson, the most prominent gun manufacturer in the United States, where it was first introduced into police investigations, and then imported into England to be adopted by Scotland Yard from the early sixties. Tabatha Yeatts’ *Forensics: Solving the Crime* (2001) informs us:

In 1959, American law enforcement officials came up with a method that allowed any police officer to be an artist. Called Identi-Kit, this system was made up of a set of transparencies — see-through sheets of plastic — printed with drawings of individual features such as noses, eyes, and chins. The transparencies could be layered to create a whole face. A special pencil was included to allow the users to customize the combined picture, known as a composite.

Yeatts' casual comparison of the assembling of ready-made facial features painted on plastic sheets to a form of every man's (policeman's?) art is quite interesting, if in an ironic way. For it invites us to take the analogy to another level, and ask: is each of us merely a sum of individual parts or attributes easily exchangeable with others, and which can be integrated just as smoothly into someone else's identity? Can we, perhaps, come apart at the seams if tugged at, and disintegrate into pieces?

Yeatts continues:

Identi-Kit pleased police officers because they could use the system without much training, unlike methods requiring a sketch artist. Since witnesses could look at the transparencies, it enabled them to recognize features by sight rather than depending solely on their ability to describe a suspect. One drawback of the system, however, was that it was two-dimensional. Was it possible for police officers to add more realism to their facial composites of the suspects? (99)

They were indeed able to add some realism by developing more sophisticated facial identification techniques, such as PhotoFit and E-Fit, to replace or supplement Identi-Kit. But how helpful are these methods in actual criminal investigations? Some researchers, including Comish (1987) and Pezdek, Sperry and Owens (2007), have shown that facial reconstruction using Identi-Kit can actually interfere with the memory of the eyewitness, rather than help them retrieve it and recall the suspect's face more clearly. If this is the case in an experimenter's lab, then what will happen in real-life situations where witnesses are questioned by the police and are under pressure?

This is exactly the kind of question posed by Elizabeth Loftus, an American social psychologist who is famous — or infamous, perhaps — for her controversial study of false memory. Since the eighties, she has stood in innumerable courtrooms throughout the United States, explaining as an expert witness about the grossly unreliable nature of eyewitness testimony, which very often sways juries even in cases where there is little or no other material evidence against the defendant. Loftus has drawn a good deal of criticism from those who see her as trying to undermine the force of eyewitness testimony by, for example, rape victims who have survived to “identify” their offenders. In her book *Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness, and the Expert Who Puts Memory on Trial* (1991), she shockingly recalls how a prosecutor, whom she had met during a rape trial in which she testified for the defense, walked right up to her and “in a voice heavy with self-righteous fury, said, ‘You are nothing but a whore’” (9). In short, she is regarded by many as being anti-justice, a vindicator of criminals.

We get the sense, however, that this may only be an ostensible reason for the public's fear and hate towards Loftus and her research, for her findings have implications that undermine our most fundamental beliefs about the way we feel about our lives, and our own selves. In *Witness for the Defense*, Loftus forcefully demonstrates, through many real-life court cases she has been involved in, that memory is malleable, subject to interpretation and revision, and even to creation from zero. It is perfectly possible, Loftus convincingly argues, to plant a brand-new memory in someone's mind, which will then be virtually indistinguishable from the memory of what was real, of what was actually experienced. The disconcerting truth is that, contrary to our intuitive belief, the memory of the past is not a “place way back there that is preserved in

stone”, immutable and always available for our reference (Loftus 20). Rather, it is “a living thing that changes shape, expands, shrinks, and expands again”, “an amoebalike creature with powers to make us laugh, and cry, and clench our fists”, which grows and transforms in accordance with the way we feed it (20). Writer and psychologist Lauren Slater writes of Loftus in *Opening Skinner’s Box*: “She’s pointed out to the public — in a way no postmodern scholar ever could — how pastiche are our pasts, *how all of us are artists whose images have only the vaguest relationship to reality*. She has tossed us into an existential abyss, and we don’t like it here” (195, italics mine).

The police (who are also made into artists by the aid of Identi-Kit) and witnesses collaborate in creating an image of the suspect, which might or might not resemble the actual culprit, as chance may be. They become unwitting accomplices in this self-contained and self-serving activity, without realizing the danger of turning away from and leaving behind the real evil out there in the world. Loftus reassures us repeatedly that, in actuality, the suspects found by the police *are* guilty nearly all the time. She also warns us, however, that sometimes the imagined and invented truth born of a joint effort of the police and witnesses demands that reality imitate fiction, instead of the other way around. In such a case, innocent people can become characters trapped in a plot they are unaware of, a plot authored and set in motion without their consent. This Kafkaesque, or Sparkian, situation in real life is precisely what Loftus tries to draw our attention to.

Responding in retrospect to those who accused her of not caring about the surviving victim in a brutal serial murder case, Loftus declares: “*I couldn’t allow myself the luxury of sharing [the witness’s] fear or participating in her pain*, because I had to concern myself with the possibility that she might be pointing her finger at an innocent man” (73, italics mine). Her determination to detach herself emotionally from the victim, which in her case is professionally called for, is nevertheless strangely reminiscent of Spark the novelist’s, particularly as described by herself in a public speech entitled “Desegregation of Art”, given to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1971. There Spark coolly denounces the emotion-laden, socially conscious fiction of her time, which, in her opinion, promoted “the victim-oppressor complex” to excess (37). Perhaps we should add here that victims are, after creators and criminals, the third dominant category of inhabitants in Spark’s fiction. Indeed, as regards these characters, victimhood appears to become a profession of a sort, too.

Loftus writes: “We perceive the blending of fact and fiction that constitutes a memory as completely and utterly truthful. We are innocent victims of our mind’s manipulations” (21). But regardless of the degree of suffering undergone, she seems to suggest, they are still not entitled to the kind of mistakes that flagrantly misrepresent the truth. This is a theme which Spark has dealt with consistently from *The Comforters* on. She has made a point of representing memory as a past invented and reinvented in the mind of the recaller, which she demonstrates both in her novels and her literary biographies, particularly those of Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë. With this in mind, let us turn once more to Spark’s use of Identi-Kit, which, as we will see, becomes quite a complex metaphor involving our sense of identity, our own and other people’s, and then more.

As far as Spark’s fiction is concerned, Identi-Kit first appears in *The Driver’s Seat* (1970) — a novel which she once named as her best — in one of the “flash-forwards” which foretell of the police investigations about the heroine Lise. Apparently a typical spinsterish office worker who is, also apparently, bored out of her mind, she travels on vacation to a city in

southern Europe to find, as it turns out, a man who can kill her. After arriving in the foreign city by plane, she roams about the streets, occasionally engaging in brief conversations with strangers, telling them that “I have somebody to meet this afternoon or this evening” (36). But it is “long after midnight” when Lise finally finds the man of her destiny — a young businessman who, in fact, she had had her eye on from the beginning, when she sat next to him on the plane — and, driving the frightened man to a deserted park, hands him a knife and orders him to kill her (100). This he does, following her “instructions” almost to the last detail. At the end of the novel we see him driving away from the scene of the murder, “knowing that he will at last be taken”, as he “sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen’s uniforms, hears the cool and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear” (107).

It may be worth noting here that the film version of this novel, released in 1974 and starring Elizabeth Taylor and Andy Warhol, was entitled *Identikit*. (The alternative titles of this highly unsuccessful movie were *The Driver’s Seat* and *The Psychotic*.) The narrative of the novel, which actually reads in many places like a police report, progresses backwards and forwards at the same time, as it were, for the clock keeps ticking eerily in the background as Lise is observed by the third-person, omniscient-type narrator to prepare meticulously for her plan and then to execute it, moving towards the “destination” in her mind, while the narrator inserts sudden and increasingly frequent “retrospective flash-forwards”, looking back at the incidents in the narrative present from the latest point in the story time, when Lise is dead and the police are investigating who she is. Indeed, even before we are informed of Lise’s fate, the narrator provides a highly impersonal physical description of her, which already sounds somewhat like a postmortem report:

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, italics mine)

There is already a subtle suggestion here of the discrepancy between the real Lise and the retrospective and almost mechanical representation of her. Such a representation, however, will be the only thing available to the police and the public as they try, in their respective spheres, to establish the identity of the lonely woman who has been, as it appears, brutally murdered as a result of an unfortunate and accidental encounter.

The flash-forwards also show several people Lise meets on her journey, suspects and witnesses, recalling and describing their encounters with her to the police. In one such instance, the narrator tells us:

[The witness] nevertheless will come forward and repeat *all she remembers and all she does not remember, and all the details she imagines to be true and those that are true*, in her conversation with Lise when she sees in the papers that the police are trying to trace who Lise is, and whom, if anyone, she met on her trip and what she had said. (23, italics mine)

Here we have a perfect example of the Loftusian moment, of the birth of fake memory. Once Lise is dead, she will be reconstructed, resurrected almost, in the public’s imagination, where

she will be transformed into another, far more two-dimensional individual. The strange message we get from the novel, however, is that this is exactly what Lise wants, that the real purpose of her plan is to impose on the public mind a memory of a woman who is not Lise, and who has never existed. We do not learn why she does this. All we know is that she intentionally “lays the trail” for the police all along, and manipulates their interpretation of her story even after she is dead. As we will see later, this peculiar attempt of Lise’s foreshadows Spark’s subsequent novels, especially *The Only Problem*, in which she directly deals with the knotty riddle of memory, identity and interpretation which creates a deep chasm between even the closest individuals.

III

The Only Problem is centered around Harvey Gotham, a scholar who lives alone in an isolated little cottage in France, working on a monograph on the poetic enigma of the *Book of Job*, with which he has been occupied for years. Two years prior to the beginning of the story, he walked out on his beautiful wife Effie, who displayed a disgusting lack of morality by stealing two bars of chocolate from a store one day, and now their divorce is going through. A grumpy and self-absorbed hermit figure, Harvey resembles his own subject of study: Job himself. He is annoyed when visited in his hiding place by various people, who come and try to reason with him, just like Job’s comforters. (Spark herself had published an article on the *Book of Job* in 1955, in the *Church of England Newspaper*; it was a subject she had had in mind for a long time, as indicated in the title of *The Comforters*.) Furthermore, he is disturbed to find himself being investigated and interrogated by the police, who suspect that Effie is now involved in terrorist activities in France and, subsequently, in the murder of an officer. The parallel between Harvey and Job develops along this strange line, until it emerges that the *Book of Job* itself is interpretable (at least in Harvey’s eyes) in terms of the question of suspected crimes and their investigation. Did Job commit a sin or didn’t he? Is he an innocent man who is “framed” by God? If so, what is God’s motive?

Effie, who is conspicuous throughout most of the novel by her absence as a hunted fugitive, only appears to Harvey and the reader by way of her likenesses, all of whom both resemble her and yet somehow do not resemble her. Right before Harvey is accosted by the police to be questioned about Effie, and told that she is now a prime suspect with charges of terrorism and murder against her, he finds in the morning paper “a group of three identikits, wanted people, two men and a girl”, and the “outlines of the girl’s face struck him as being rather like Ruth’s” (75). Ruth is Effie’s elder sister who, in another typical Sparkian twist of events, has now moved in with Harvey with Effie’s baby (not by Harvey). It is repeatedly emphasized that Effie and Ruth look like each other, and that they do not.

The sisters looked very much alike in their separate features; it was one of those cases where the sum total of each came out with a difference, to the effect that Effie was extremely beautiful and Ruth was nothing remarkable; perhaps it was a question of colouring and complexion. (47)

Later, when Harvey recalls the Identi-Kit picture of Effie which he saw in the paper, he says that it looks like Effie, while he also claims that “in fact it looked like Ruth”, and “it looked

like Job's wife, too" (122). Here he is referring to the painting of Job and his wife by Georges de la Tour, a seventeenth-century work displayed in a museum he frequents. Effie's image continues to pervade Harvey's mind, both desirable and disturbing, familiar and strange.

Is Effie really a terrorist and a murderer? Or is she living in a cult-like hippie community in California, as testified to by Harvey's aunt, who claims she saw her there on TV? Had she really always had it in her to be a terrorist, as Harvey wonders more than once? Some of these questions are answered at the end of the novel, when Harvey comes to confront her in a morgue; she has been shot by the police in Paris, along with fellow terrorists.

Her head was bound up, turban-wise, so that she looked more than ever like Job's wife. Her mouth was drawn slightly to the side.

"You recognize your wife, Effie Gotham?"

"Yes, but this isn't my wife. Where is she? Bring me my wife's body."

"M. Gotham, you are overwrought. It displeases us all very much. You know that this is your wife."

"Yes, it's my wife, Effie." (177)

Still, even as Harvey "identifies" her body, Effie's identity evades him; he does and does not know her. To the reader, Effie remains a concept, rather than a human being, to the end. But strangely, Harvey's failed attempt to make a coherent whole out of the fragmentary, mutually incompatible images of his wife somehow makes us feel that he is being honest, at least, in his failure. Rather than submitting to, and being contented with, an Identi-Kit-like mental picture of Effie, that is, a set of incongruous attributes carelessly thrown together to feign wholeness, he decides to give up the very effort at interpretation, which he knows is essentially synonymous with invention and, therefore, inevitably means the distortion of the Effie whom he has known. The whole is greater, after all, than the sum of its parts.

The entire text of *The Only Problem* can be read as a record of a particular effort on the part of Harvey, an effort to reconstruct a unified image of Effie. But this is not to say that Effie as a character matters in this novel; she does not, not a whit. She is an empty space, a blank, into which many puzzle pieces seem to fit, and yet not one of them quite does so. There is a great temptation to cram one, any one, into this space, for, as Lauren Slater says, "apparently our minds abhor blank spots, are existentially unprepared for emptiness. We fill in" (187). To quote Loftus once more:

When we remember, we pull pieces of the past out of some mysterious region in the brain — jagged jigsaw pieces that we sort and shift, arrange and rearrange until they fit into a pattern that makes sense. The finished product, the memory that seems so clear and focused in our minds, is actually part fact, part fiction, a warped and twisted reconstruction of reality. (67)

Instead of being satisfied with a "warped and twisted reconstruction of reality", it may be said, Harvey decides to live with the mystery of the unknowable which is the other (represented by Effie) — just as Job at the end of his ordeals stops trying to find a reasonable explanation for his suffering and submits to a life filled with the mysteriousness of God, at least as Harvey — like Spark — interprets it. What matters in this novel, then, concerns exactly how the great temptation to have a coherent picture, to *make sense*, is experienced by both Harvey and the reader, and how it is *resisted*, at least by the former. In short, *The Only Problem* is an anti-

imagination novel, since imagination, which supposedly allows us to empathize with the other and to enjoy reading novels, can also prevent us from seeing what is right in front of our eyes, compelling us to accept, as it were, the imitation rather than the original.

IV

Was Spark a great novelist? This is a serious question that has not yet been addressed either fully or directly by those who study her, who try to make sense of her absurd but complicated plots and to sympathize — despite the more than occasional difficulty to do so — with her often immoral characters and their infuriatingly blasé or callous attitudes. The major reason why this issue is approached, if ever, only in a euphemistic manner is perhaps that we still feel largely unsure of what exactly her novels are *about*, what they seek to achieve. Now, two and a half years after Spark's death, we are no closer to an answer, especially perhaps as the long-expected authorized biography of Spark by Martin Stannard was suspended by her after its completion, even though she had commissioned it herself. *The Telegraph* of August 24, 2007 reports that Spark claimed it was not “the true story” of her life — that, according to A.S. Byatt, who was a close friend of hers, it contained discussions of her private life by which she was “deeply hurt”. The biography might appear in 2009, but then again it might not.

Therefore, for now at least, we are left only with her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), to look for clues to guide us in our interpretation of her oeuvre, which consists of one puzzling novel after another. However, the book offers us little insight as such, for it is strictly factual and hardly reveals any private thoughts and feelings. It is equally devoid of embellishment and excitement and, in fact, almost reads like a historical record. “I was determined to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or eyewitness,” says Spark in the introduction, “I have not relied on my memory alone, vivid though it is. . . . Truth by itself is neutral and has its own dear beauty” (11). It is quite curious as well as significant that she should sound like someone testifying under oath in a court of law in her first statement, and like a poet in her second. Spark was evidently determined to give the reader a minimum of material to elaborate on, and no space for their fancy to expand and explode in. Stannard's book, on the other hand, must have failed to meet her stringent standards of factuality. The irony is that Spark had no doubt commissioned it in the hope of obliterating from the public's mind the memory of an earlier, unauthorized biography published in 1963 by Derek Stanford, her erstwhile business and romantic partner. She has bitterly, and it appears quite justifiably, criticized Stanford, for writing a book full of gross inaccuracies and sheer lies. (It is believed that the character of Hector Bartlett, to whom the title of “pisseur de copie” is awarded in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, is based on Stanford.)

Could it be that she was personally, profoundly afraid of the imagination of the reader, who would just go off and create a new Spark in their mind and be happy with it, forgetting the real Muriel and reading all her novels, her life's work, in a misguided attempt to interpret this figment of a woman unknown even to herself? Or was it her sense of mission as a novelist that made her extremely wary of precisely this type of public imagination, which she condemned and ridiculed time and again in her fiction? Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that Spark's fascination, or indeed obsession, with the subject of faulty representation, based primarily on faulty memory, defines the direction of her late novels, the reception of which has been decidedly less favorable than that of her early works.

Works such as *The Bachelors*, *Memento Mori*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means* have been described, often with a curious mixture of adoration and dismissal, as “sweet” or “charming” little novels. They were commended for their lively, if quirky, representations of particular localities or communities with focus on a group of comparatively realistic characters, whether a set of young girls or a group of bachelors, in London or Edinburgh. But ironically, the kind of details that charmed the readers were obviously regarded as superfluous by the author, inasmuch as she gradually shed them from her writing. She started experimenting with a new, even more minimalist style than before, a process culminating in *The Driver’s Seat*, which, whether or not we agree with her claim that it is her best novel, definitely marks a turning point in her career.

Most of the characters in her novels from the late seventies through this century have no “narrative center of gravity” (to use philosopher Daniel Dennett’s phrase), and appear merely to float and skid across the surface of the text, occasionally even blending into the narrative background, without standing out as people at all. They are erasable and rewritable like what is written on a blackboard, and we get the sense of watching mere specters consisting of words, expanding and deflating, and shifting and turning at the tip of the author’s pen. The same can be said of the plots they figure in, which also resemble a patchwork of fragments sown roughly together, rather than independent, *organic* narratives. It is as if these novels — *Territorial Rights* (1979), *Symposium* (1990), *Reality and Dreams* (1997), to name just a few — were so many faces put together by Identi-Kit, so that if some episodes or characters were exchanged with one another, it would probably not seem to affect the texts very much.

And yet there are a few memorable characters in some of them, who pervade the entire books with their presence, providing a binding force to pull the parts together and create a definite sense of *real* wholeness, which is greater than their sum. It cannot be a coincidence that these are all female characters strongly reminiscent of the author herself: Fleur in *Loitering with Intent*, Mrs Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and Hildegard in *Aiding and Abetting*. What makes them so memorable and impressive despite their acerbity, not to mention their decidedly criminal streak? Most definitely not deep passions, delicate sympathies, or fine morals, qualities found in traditional heroines. It is not even their strength and “talent for summoning up new fighting energy” which allows them to be always on the “offensive”, even though they do share, and are defined in part by, these characteristics of fierceness and vitality (Spark 2000: 150).

Rather, what most distinguishes them from other characters is their ability to *doubt*, a mental faculty which, ultimately, best defines being human. It is doubt that prevents these heroines from succumbing blindly to what may be called the narrative instinct, allowing them to preserve their sanity and, even more importantly, their sense of humor even in the most maddening situations. Meanwhile, the lack of such an ability drives all the other characters to grossly subjective interpretations of the world around them, leading them to exaggerated and spectacular ruin, sometimes even to death. These latter are, like witnesses in Loftus’ book, suggestible, gullible, easily swayed and manipulated by the cues cunningly provided by authors or the authorities.

Of course, these people are victims too, if only of their own minds, to use Loftus’s phrase — except they nevertheless get no sympathy, not even the reader’s, because their plight is ridiculous and pathetic, not tragic (according to the distinction made by Spark in “Desegregation of Art”). Pity has no place in Spark’s fiction; in fact, pity is exactly what it

attempts to deconstruct, which is tantamount, to a greater extent perhaps than we might think, to deconstructing the very act of reading fiction. By being thus deprived of the luxury and comfort of extending our compassion, we are forced to watch the workings of our own mind as we turn the page, frowning and often at a loss, trying to see what *else* we actually do when we read novels — and to contemplate, with a sense of alarm, the disturbing affinity between the creativity of crime and the crime of creativity.

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