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The first half of Muriel Spark

by Roger Kimball

A review of Curriculum Vitae by Muriel Spark.

The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable impossibilities.
—Aristotle, the Poetics

When I first started writing people used to say my novels were exaggerated. They never were exaggerated, merely aspects of realism.
—Muriel Spark, Loitering with Intent

In a review of the reissue of London Labour and the London Poor in 1968, W. H. Auden remarked that Henry Mayhew’s sprawling portrait of Victorian London street life—brimming with such vivid specimens as Jack Black, Rat-Killer to Her Majesty—led him to revise his understanding of Dickens. Far from being a “fantastic creator of over-life-size characters,” Auden concluded, Dickens was in fact “much more of a ‘realist’ than he is generally taken for.”

One occasionally has a similar feeling when reading the fiction of the Scottish-born novelist Muriel Spark. What seems at first like caricature often turns out to pass, for the moment anyway, as unvarnished reportage. Generally, the reports are not encouraging. Perhaps, deep down, “the facts” themselves express a species of caricature; and perhaps, on reflection, one realizes this. Spark’s trick is to coax us into musing that, if one were to go deeper still, maybe … The presentiment often terminates in an ellipsis, a feeling of uneasiness, anxiety. Not for nothing is the imperative “Memento Mori”—Remember that you shall die—the title of one of her best known and most accomplished books. In that sober tale, all the characters are aged and more than a few are senile. “Being over seventy,” one of them observes, “is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and dying as on a battlefield.” By the end of the novel, the battlefield is wiped clear, and the reader is given a brief recap of the characters’ particular fates: “Lettie Colston … comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uremia; Jean Taylor, myocardial degeneration; Tempest Sidebottome, carcinoma of the cervix;” etc., etc.

The grimly comic cultivation of such reminders is a Sparkian trademark. Doubtless, it has something to do with religion, specifically with Catholicism, the faith to which Spark converted in 1954. Our life on earth is a pilgrimage, a prolegomenon, and one mustn’t forget it: This basic conviction figures prominently, though undogmatically, in all Spark’s work, infusing it with the ambition of allegory. But the vertiginous effect of her fiction is not simply a coefficient of faith. It is also the product of a literary gift, a sensibility.
Many of the settings, events, and characters that populate Spark’s fiction have antecedents, more or less distant, in her life: a charismatic school teacher, an ailing grandmother, a club for women in war-time London, a friend who was murdered by her husband who in turn killed himself. All appear transmuted—transfigured, to use a Sparkian adjective—in her novels and stories. Spark is a dab hand at presenting the wrong end of the telescope and then exclaiming, “See, I told you it was like that!” Her imaginings are frequently extravagant. It is business as usual in Sparkland to find a story narrated by a ghost (“He looked as if he would murder me and he did,” a dead narrator explains), a plot turned by an angel. Yet it is a measure of Spark’s artistry that—in those works where everything gels—ghosts and angels seem no more (but also no less) outrageous than rhododendrons. Somehow it is not a problem that the anonymous telephone calls to the characters in *Memento Mori* (1959) reminding them of their doom are without earthly source. Suspending or extending disbelief hardly comes into it: Spark’s spare, immaculate prose—cool and fatally accurate—does the work, easing collusion if not, exactly, affirmation. There is a moral but no catechism.

In this respect, if in few others, her work recalls the Gothic realism of the American novelist and master of the short story Flannery O’Connor. For both writers, the operation of grace is generally a funny but decidedly astringent affair. The humor comes from regarding the doings of man sub specie aeternitatis, the ultimate prescription for farce. What we might call this cosmic dimension of Spark’s comic vision led the novelist Malcolm Bradbury to speak, admiringly, of her “great gift for being appalling.” The gift is appalling because it grants insight but tends to discount such homely virtues as warmth, human attachment, affection. Not everyone finds this attractive. The critic Christopher Ricks, for example, writing about Spark in 1968, commented that “Perhaps when man proposes, God disposes with as cool a disposition as Mrs. Spark’s, though if He indeed looks upon His created world with the same eye with which she looks upon hers, then thank God I am an atheist.” One imagines Spark savored that “thank God.”

She was intensely literary from the dawn of reason, setting down poem after poem beginning in grade school. But Muriel Spark did not embark earnestly on fiction until the early 1950s. Since then, she has been unstoppable. Although she has lived for some years in Italy, dividing her time, we are told, between Rome and Tuscany, Spark has not relinquished a Scottish disposition to industry. (“What a wonderful thing it was to be a woman and an artist in the twentieth century,” Fleur Talbot, the narrator of *Loitering with Intent* (1981), repeatedly exclaims: despite the irony—Fleur is a bit creepy—the declaration has the air of a credo.) To date, in addition to several early collaborations, Spark has to her credit nineteen novels, an abundance of verse (she continues, she says, to think of herself as “predominantly a poet”), a plump Collected Stories, a play, a children’s book, biographies of Mary Shelley and John Masefield, and an edition of the Brontë letters. One of her best and most subtle books, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), was made into a successful play and then, with Maggie Smith in the title role, a successful movie. (Glenda Jackson was signed up for the movie version of *The Abbess of Crewe* [1974], a political potboiler, which seems about right.)

Along the way, Spark has collected much critical admiration—piquantly leavened with the occasional critical dissent—literary awards too numerous to list, endless academic comment, and, in 1967, an O.B.E. from Queen Elizabeth. Her latest book is a volume of autobiography, entitled *Curriculum Vitae*, which sets forth the facts, personages, and occasions of Muriel Spark’s life from 1918, when she was born, through 1957, when her first novel, *The Comforters*, was published. It presents the contingencies through which a precocious young woman became Muriel Spark, providing, as she hoped it would, a portrait of the young woman as an artist: a vivid if carefully cropped picture of her “formation as a creative writer.” Concluding just as she crosses the threshold into literary maturity, the book ends with a promise of a sequel dealing with the “work, many travels and adventures” as well as “friends, famous and obscure,” that have filled her life since 1957.
Various rumors, half-truths, fabrications, and other types of falsehood have collected around Spark as they collect around many well-known writers. Part of her reason for undertaking Curriculum Vitae, she tells us, was to “put the record straight.” To this end, she has not relied solely on her memory for corroboration of the events she recounts, but has endeavored “to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or eyewitnesses.” Spark professes a horror of untruth. “Lies,” she warns, “are like fleas hopping from here to there, sucking the blood of the intellect.” She regards with contempt the writer of a recent biography who could not understand why Spark should be irritated about the fabrications promulgated in her book since, after all, she had portrayed Spark “in a good light.” “Be that as it might,” Spark writes, “it was all untrue.”

Some of the errors circulating about Muriel Spark can be traced to innocent mistakes that have assumed the patina of plausibility through constant repetition by critics and scholars. Other errors have their source in the animus of certain of Spark’s former friends, especially Derek Stanford, with whom she collaborated on several literary projects in the early Fifties. Stanford, Spark tells us, was “bookish with scholarly leanings” but “wildly and almost constitutionally inaccurate.” When he got around to writing about Spark in the 1960s (and then again in 1977), he seems to have produced farragoes of error and invention. For example, Stanford claims that Spark was in love with T. S. Eliot (in fact, she had never met him), that her grandmother had gypsy blood (a “picturesque proposition,” Spark comments, for which no evidence exists), that he went with her to visit her “Uncle Solly” about money (there was no such relative). He thinks Proust wrote a book called Recherche dans le temps perdu and assures readers that the infant Muriel was suckled until she was two. (“How ridiculous!” was her mother’s comment: “There must be something wrong with the man.”) Spark provides only an incomplete list of Stanford’s errors, but we get the point: caveat lector. And watch out for the silver, too: Spark reports that Stanford pilfered certain manuscripts of her early work and later tried to sell them back to her through an agent.

Curriculum Vitae opens in Edinburgh, the Morningside district, with Muriel’s birth to Bernard and Sarah Camberg. Her father, an engineer, was of Scottish-Jewish descent; her mother, néé Uezzell, was from an English shopkeeping family in Watford. Philip, Muriel’s only sibling, was the elder by five and a half years. Financially, the Cambergs were modestly but respectably situated: there were few luxuries, but then who went in for luxuries at that time in Edinburgh? Family life seems to have been chummy and reasonably cheerful. Sarah Camberg had suffered what Muriel describes as a nervous breakdown before her daughter was born, but the only aftereffects mentioned are a tendency to mild superstition and a dislike of being left alone. Religious education at school was standard-issue Presbyterianism, laced at home with a few Jewish observances.

Bernard Camberg’s Jewishness presented no social problems for young Muriel— having grown up in Edinburgh, he fit right in—but her mother’s Englishness was a recurrent source of small but memorable, mortifications. “‘Foreigners’ were something fairly tolerated, but ‘the English’ were something quite different,” she recalls. Everyone knew that the English tended to be “superficial,” “hypocritical,” and “overdressed.” They also talked funny. Not only did Sarah Camberg wear a coat trimmed with beige fox fur when she ought to have worn tweed or (if it was really cold) musquash (i.e., muskrat), but also she was overheard by her daughter to say to another mother at school: “I have some shopping to do.” Spark remarks: “I nearly died. She should have said, ‘I’ve got to get the messages.’”
This is a book bursting with such particularities. “Details fascinate me,” Spark writes at the beginning of her chronicle. “I love to pile up details. They create an atmosphere. Names, too, have a magic, be they never so humble.” Accordingly, the first part of *Curriculum Vitae* is a compilation of childhood details, a building-up of atmosphere. Sights, sounds, tastes, names, personalities, amusements. We learn about the neighborhood bakery, Howden’s, and the kinds of bread they made; we visit the Buttercup Dairy where one purchased fresh butter from a pink-and-white complexioned girl; and we rehearse the proper method of making tea. “Everyone who came to the house was offered a cup of tea, as in Dostoyevsky.” If served at five o’clock, tea was something one “took”; at six, one “ate” it. High tea, accompanied by kippers, smoked haddock, ham, and eggs, occurred at 6:30. Other details: her grandmother’s clothes, for example. The “petticoats were voluminous, gathered at the waist; one in each set was cream-coloured or grey flannel, one was white linen edged with lace and one was black. My grandmother’s stockings were black wool. They were kept up by pink elastic bands, her garters,” etc. There are many such “piles” of detail in this short, relaxed, elegantly written book. As Miss Jean Brodie put it, in a somewhat different context: “For those who like that sort of thing … that is the sort of thing they like.” (While on the subject of detail, it may be worth pointing out that aficionados of detail, and others, are likely to be frustrated by the book’s lack of an index.)

Spark describes herself as an avid listener and “person-watcher” from an early age. One believes it. Young Muriel must have been a formidable creature to have around the house, listening, watching. When she was about “four or five,” she recalls,

I had been given a dolls’ pram constructed for twins, with a folding hood at each end. My dolls, Red Rosie and Queenie, sat facing each other. I remember one day I was crying and bawling for some reason. My father fetched a face-cloth and wiped the faces of my two dolls, bidding them not to cry. I was so fascinated by this performance that I stopped crying, and I distinctly recall a sensation or instinct that, if I could have put it into words, would have been “I’m not taken in by his ruse, but at the same time what a good child-psychologist he is!”

And what a prodigious child psychologist was she.

Education was held in exceptionally high esteem in Edinburgh, and rich merchants vied with one another to found and endow schools. One such worthy was James Gillespie, snuff merchant, who died in 1797, leaving part of his fortune to found a school for boys and girls. (When Gillespie asked a friend for a motto for his carriage, Spark informs us, the friend proposed: “Wha wad hae thocht it / That noses had bocht it.” Gillespie declined the couplet and used his initials instead.) Muriel entered the school at the age of five and spent twelve years there, “the most formative years of my life, and in many ways the most fortunate for a future writer.” She was a clever student whose grades were good enough to secure a scholarship when she entered the High School. “After the age of twelve,” she proudly reports, “I did not involve my parents in school fees.”

At a time when allegations of “child abuse” are in the papers daily, it is refreshing to contemplate the relative innocence of social life in a city like Edinburgh in the 1920s. Spark tells a charming story about her history master, a Mr. Gordon. Being fond of her hair, Gordon would have Muriel sit in the front of the class so that he could stroke her hair while teaching. Because of “the universal decency of our school teachers’ deportment,” she notes, no one thought ill of him for it. “There was nothing whatsoever wrong with Jerry Gordon,” she remarks. “The girls tittered quite a lot. I liked it quite a lot.”
Among other attainments, James Gillespie’s High School for Girls (as it came to be) was the original for the Marcia Blaine School for Girls that provides the setting for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. An eccentric schoolmistress, Miss Christina Kay, provided the inspiration for Jean Brodie. “I fell into Miss Kay’s hands at the age of eleven,” Spark writes. “It might well be said that she fell into my hands.” Spark started writing about Miss Kay and her adventures even then.

Like her fictional counterpart, Miss Kay adorned her classroom walls with reproductions of paintings by Leonardo, Giotto, Botticelli, and other Italian masters; it was the late Twenties, and this lover of romance, again like her fictional counterpart, also displayed a newspaper clipping of Mussolini’s fascisti marching along the streets of Rome. Spark does not say whether Miss Kay, like Miss Jean Brodie, walked with her head “up, up”; but Miss Kay did refer to her young charges as the “crème de la crème” and regaled them with stories of her travels in Rome, Egypt, Switzerland as well as the poetry of Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, Yeats, and (a favorite of Spark’s) John Masefield.

Muriel Camberg was certainly one of Miss Kay’s favorites, for she and a schoolmate accompanied her (at Miss Kay’s expense) to the theater, to art galleries, and to Anna Pavlova’s last tour of Edinburgh. From what Spark says, it seems that Miss Kay displayed the charm and imperiousness but not the deep moral ambiguity that distinguished Jean Brodie. One can imagine Miss Kay believing, with Miss Brodie, that the solution to mathematical problems was all well and good, but “quite useless to Sybil Thorndike, Anna Pavlova and the late Helen of Troy.” One cannot imagine her trying to manipulate one of her former students into sleeping with a married man whom she herself loves but has forsaken. Miss Kay, Spark conjectures, would have put Miss Brodie “firmly in her place.”

After the James Gillespie’s School, the prospect of university was less than wholly appealing. Not only would a university career for the modestly situated Camberg girl be “something of a luxury” but also, Muriel noticed, “many older girls who were studying at Edinburgh University in those days were humanly rather dull and earnest, without adult style or charm, indeed there was a puritanical atmosphere.” Instead of university, she took a course in précis writing, a discipline that shows itself in her trim, to-the-point writing to this day. “I love economical prose, and would always try to find the briefest way to express a meaning.” She then taught in a small private day school where instead of pay she was given free tuition in shorthand and typing. This stood her in good stead when she put in a brief stint at an exclusive women’s department store in Edinburgh working as a secretary to the owner. The department store provided some comic relief—Spark recalls overhearing “some of the most affected and absurd conversation between the clients and the saleswomen that I’ve ever heard in my life”—but essentially she was biding her time, waiting for the rest of her life to happen.

It began happening later that year, 1936, when Muriel met Sydney Oswald Spark at a club in Edinburgh. Thirteen years her senior, Spark was a teacher who was soon to depart for a three-year appointment in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It is an exquisitely Sparkian detail that Sydney Spark should have been known as S.O.S. He was an emotional wreck and must have been emitting distress signals from the start. Muriel’s parents sensed trouble, but she in her eagerness to get on with life—and out of Edinburgh—saw only the prospect of escape. “I thought him interesting, as I generally found ‘older men.’” In 1937, Muriel became engaged to Spark and in due course followed him to Southern Rhodesia. She was then nineteen. Being underage, she had to cable her father for permission to marry. Reluctantly, he gave it.
Sydney Spark was, as she now acknowledges, a “disastrous choice.” In Africa, he became more and more unbalanced and subject to fits of violence. Within two years Muriel was thinking of leaving him. In a calm and lucid moment, the wretched fellow said “One day this will all appear to you as a bad dream.” He was right. “He became a borderline case,” Muriel remarks, “and I didn’t like what I found on either side of the border.” When she became pregnant, Sydney tried to convince her to get an abortion. This form of murder was not the routine procedure it has become today, and Muriel refused. A son, Robin, was born in July 1938.

Because of her husband’s quarrelsome nature, the Sparks were constrained to move around Southern Rhodesia a great deal. Domestically, Muriel admits, this was a “drawback.” But a new toughness was dawning, and she points out that “drawbacks can be advantages if you think in the opposite direction.” In those years, circumstances provided many occasions for thinking in the opposite direction. It might be said that Muriel Camberg got two good things from her husband, a son and a name: “Spark,” as she implies, has more poetry in it than “Camberg.” But she also got Africa. As the world tilted toward and finally collapsed into war, Muriel found herself trapped there, unable to arrange transport back to England.

Muriel Spark’s sojourn in Africa was the opposite of pleasant: a failed marriage, poverty, little prospect of leaving before the end of the war, few friends with literary interests. (Doris Lessing was living someplace in Rhodesia at the time, but the two writers did not meet until many years later.) Nevertheless, she continued to write, poems mostly, and collected material for some of her best-known stories. Africa, as much as Edinburgh, formed her as a writer. It also made her an adult. It was in Africa, she says, that she “learned to cope with life.” “It was there that I learned to keep in mind … the essentials of our human destiny, our responsibilities, and to put in a peripheral place the personal sorrows, frights and horrors that came my way.”

Horrors there were aplenty. The racial situation was barbaric. The Afrikaner women with whom Muriel mingled were full of smug stories about how uppity blacks had been “fixed.” There was, for example, the farmer who discovered a young black boy standing outside the window of his wife’s room, peeping in at her while she breast-fed her baby. For this violation, the farmer shot the boy dead. The woman who told Spark this story only lamented that the farmer had been sent to prison for three years for killing the boy. “I was unable to speak,” Spark reports. “I simply stared at the woman.”

Racial barbarism took other forms as well. After leaving her husband, Muriel applied for a job in an Anglican convent school. The Mother Superior took a great liking to her, especially her fair “complexion and golden hair.” During her second interview—there were four in all—the nun told her that there might indeed be an opening for her. “You see,” she said, “the trouble with this war is the Jews. We need more people like you.” She went on and on about the Jews and how right Hitler was. Muriel played along, fascinated to see how far the woman would go. But before the fourth interview she said to the woman,

“Of course, I’m a Jew.”

She said, “It’s not so.”

I said, “What isn’t so?”

She said, “What you just said.”
I took my fair skin and my golden locks right out of there.

Despite warnings about the dangers and privations, Muriel was aching to return to England before the war ended. Finally, in February 1944, she found transport on a troop-ship. She and the thirty or so other women who joined her were told not to undress for bed and to wear dark trousers. Dark clothes, a typed instruction sheet informed them, were advisable in case the boat should be torpedoed: sharks tended to overlook dark clothes. “I am sure,” she writes, “this was a mess-room jollification.”

After visiting her family in Edinburgh, Spark went to London to look for work. She stayed at the Helena Club, founded by a daughter of Queen Victoria for “Ladies from Good Families of Modest Means who are Obliged to Pursue an Occupation in London.” This of course was the original of the May of Teck Club, the setting for The Girls of Slender Means (1963), one of Spark’s funniest books. Recalling events in 1945, when “all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions,” the book peeks in on the life of half a dozen girls living at the club. “As they realized themselves in varying degrees, few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage than the girls of slender means.”

Spark landed a plum job with the Foreign Office after a woman at the employment bureau noticed that she was reading a novel by one of her favorite writers, Ivy Compton-Burnett. Spark became a Duty Secretary in the same division of military intelligence that employed Ian Fleming. Their job was psychological warfare or “black propaganda.” “Black propaganda,” she explains,

was distinct from the BBC’s white variety. Black took up the position that we were loyal Germans devoted to the Führer. From that point of view the news was presented in such a way that the Germans got the impression that they were listening to a German station. This was a camouflage for subtle and deadly anti-Nazi propaganda.

It was, she concludes, “detailed truth with believable lies”—a phrase that, suitably qualified, might double as a description of Spark’s own technique as a writer.

After the war, Spark first worked as an editor and writer at a quarterly magazine called The Argentor, the official publication of the National Jewellers’ Association. In 1947, she became editor of Poetry Review, the journal of the Poetry Society, where she stayed until 1949. It was a difficult job. Spark took the post partly because she was promised a flat. She never got the flat. But she did earn the abiding animosity of certain members of the Poetry Society who could not understand why she hesitated to print their poetic effusions. There was, for example, Robert Armstrong, “a physically and morally twisted, small, dark fellow,” who was on the executive committee of the society. Spark published a poem of his which had been accepted by the previous editor, but she neglected to mention his name on the front cover. This brought an outraged letter from him on his business letterhead, H. M. Inspector of Taxes, Willesdon District. A battle ensued that ended only with Spark’s departure from the Poetry Review.
Spark reserves some of her most delicious malice for another opponent of her innovations at the Poetry Society, Dr. Marie Stopes. Stopes, famous for her proselytizing activities on behalf of birth control, abominated any hint of experimentation in the realm of poetry. She instantly became Spark’s bitter enemy and campaigned vigorously to have her removed as editor. Stopes often led meetings of the society, “literally shaking her fist and making inflammatory, wild pronouncements.” Among other things, she wrote to ask if it was true that Spark’s husband had divorced her. Spark’s reply begins: “I have received your outrageously impudent letter… . My private affairs are no concern of yours and your malicious interest in them seems to me to be most unwholesome.” Spark briskly acknowledges the beneficence of Stopes’s prophylactic advocacy. Then she eviscerates her. “I met [Stopes] at one of our meetings and knew she disliked me intensely on sight. I was young and pretty and she had totally succumbed to the law of gravity without attempting to do a thing about it.” Spark concludes wistfully, “I used to think it a pity that her mother rather than she had not thought of birth control.”

After leaving the Poetry Society, Spark started a short-lived magazine called Forum with the financial help of some friends. In 1950, she wrote her study of Mary Shelley —now an overdone subject, but at the time quite out of the ordinary. She met and interviewed John Masefield, whom she also wrote about, and began her rocky collaboration with Derek Stanford. She was writing a great deal of poetry but found herself often entering the word “returned” in the ledger in which she kept track of the publications she sent her work to. Her first notable public success came in 1951 when her story “The Seraph and the Zambesi” won first prize (out of 6,700 entries) in a competition sponsored by The Observer. The judges were David Astor, editor of the paper, Philip Toynbee, and Terence Kilmartin. First prize was the then-handsome sum of £250. She gave £50 to her son for his bar mitzvah and also generously gave £50 to Derek Stanford, thus illustrating the principle that no good deed goes unpunished. She bought herself a blue velvet dress and a complete set of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

“The Seraph and the Zambesi” was an important success. But it did not bring financial security. At one point in the early Fifties Spark had only one dress and her shoes had holes in them. In 1954, as a result of undernourishment and too much dexedrine, she fell ill and suffered from mild hallucinations. The hallucinations, however, turned out to be a godsend. They formed the inspiration for her first novel, The Comforters (written in 1955 but not published until 1957), in which the narrator hears voices and believes herself to be a character in the novel she is writing. Evelyn Waugh, noting the similarity between *The Comforters* and his book *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (also published in 1957), was full of praise in his review: “I was struck by how much more ambitious was Miss Spark’s essay and how much better she had accomplished it.”

May 1, 1954, Spark was received into the Catholic Church at Ealing. Naturally, one recurrent question concerns her conversion. As a youth, she tells us, she had “no specific religion, but a strong religious feeling.” What experiences, bafflements, convictions—what terrors, what joys—led this earnest half-Presbyterian, half-Jewish woman to make the turn to Rome in her mid-thirties? The book jacket of the English edition of Curriculum Vitae promises Spark’s answer to this question. In the event, what she provides is a paragraph or so in the last few pages of the book. What can one say? Spark is as illuminating as one could be without being illuminating. She recount the menu but doesn’t attempt to describe the meal. Perhaps, in anything short of a spiritual apologia, this is as much as one can expect. A precipitating experience, she says, was her absorption in the theological writings of John Henry Newman in 1953. (Newman’s writings figure, ambiguously, in some of Spark’s novels, especially in *Loitering with Intent*.) But she doesn’t divulge what Newman said or argued that swayed her. This is what Spark tells us:
When I am asked about my conversion, why I became a Catholic, I can only say that the answer is both too easy and too difficult. The simple explanation is that I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed; there was no blinding revelation in my case. The more difficult explanation would involve the step by step building up of a conviction; as Newman himself pointed out, when asked about his conversion, it was not a thing one could propound “between the soup and the fish” at a dinner party. “Let them be to the trouble that I have been to,” said Newman. Indeed, the existential quality of a religious experience cannot be simply summed up in general terms.

True, true. But somehow one wants a detail or two about the beliefs that helped build her conviction, some taste, some sample of the “existential quality” she has in mind. Newman, after all, provided the Apologia pro Vita sua. We have some hints in Spark’s novels, to be sure, but works of fiction are not the same as a statement made in propria persona.

In any event, Spark’s religious convictions have played a powerful, if somewhat elusive, role in her fiction. It might be said that they form the invisible core or center of her work. This has helped to confer depth and psychological complexity to her fiction, but may also account for the disturbing “otherworldly” quality much of it exhibits. Aristotle advised the poet to prefer probable impossibilities to improbable ones. It is an open question whether Spark’s impossibilities are always suitably “probable.” But Curriculum Vitae once again reminds us that she is a paid-up subscriber to another of Aristotle’s dictums, that “the perfection of style is to be clear without being mean.”

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