

The Women of Muriel Spark

Narrative and Faith

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Muriel Spark's concept of faith is an essential feature of her work. It supplies perspective and balance. Without an appreciation of it, her novels may only be valued for their wit, their irony, their unpredictability. These are indeed attractive aspects of her writing. However, they do not function merely to tease, surprise and entertain. They exist to illustrate a life which is essentially fragmented.

In a world where nothing can be fully grasped, there are dangers; the most threatening is a misplaced confidence in a single selfish viewpoint. Such an error constitutes an essential sin in Christian terms: it is *philautia*, love of self. St Augustine described sin as a turning away from God towards the self. Sin in Christian terms is negative: it is the opposite of all that comes from God. And so we find certain characters in Spark's work mistakenly asserting themselves as the source of power and their own viewpoint as a criterion of truth. On the other hand we find characters who have a profound need to acknowledge a truth beyond themselves and who strive to come to terms with the essential inadequacy of a human perspective. These characters have a determination to identify what is true and honest in their existence; they have a sense of irony and sometimes a great sense of joy. All these characters describe themselves as Catholics. Although they are not portrayed as dependent on church ritual or practice, the dimension of faith is of the utmost importance to them.

Caroline in *The Comforters* is most explicitly bound up in her faith. She is a convert and finds herself patronized by cradle Catholics such as Mrs Hogg. She is irritated by this for she has a sense of her faith which lies beyond the smug platitudes of this woman. Although Caroline goes into retreat, she does not encounter her faith by turning her back on her life. On the contrary, the challenges, the irritations and the mysteries which nurture her faith are in her experience. She is aware that, unlike her friend Laurence, she is a wonderer; he either takes things for granted, or expects a technological solution. Caroline is ready to acquiesce before the pain and obscurity of her suffering; she has, it is said, a 'rapacity for suffering'. She has a fear of being artificially protected from truth; pain gives her a sense of the reality of existence

and it is intensified as she offers it up to God. Although she calls the demands of Christianity exorbitant and outrageous, only through her faith can she find her true identity. Faith gives her the courage to face the strange things that are happening to her and although these frighten her, she will not deny them. She tells herself that she must not be tempted to deny the facts of her experience, since for a Catholic these are the provision of a privileged insight. Outsiders are sceptical about Caroline's faith, saying that she had 'little heart for it' and that her approach was intellectual. But it is clear to the reader that Caroline is involved with her faith on the same level as she is with her own experience. It provides its own demands and enables its own acquiescence.

Other characters who are also termed Catholics have less of a struggle as a result of their faith. They look to it for an endorsement of their understanding and for a reassurance in areas that they do not understand. Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent* frequently declares that she has 'faith abounding'. She rejoices in existence more than any of Spark's other characters and this joy appears to be linked with her own creativity. She marvels at her good fortune at being an artist and a woman in the mid-twentieth century. However, this joy is not merely a personal ebullience. In terms of the narrative, Fleur's wellbeing is not presented solely as the consequence of her joy in her writing. Fleur has a gift of perception; she can see clearly and is sensitive to the personalities of those around her. For example, she revels in the warmth and generosity of Edwina, Sir Quentin's aged mother, whom she treats with great respect. Sir Quentin's housekeeper derides Edwina and has nothing but contempt for her. Fleur is deeply suspicious of Sir Quentin although he charms and mystifies others. In addition to her sensitivity to the intrinsic character of others, Fleur is also able to evaluate and control herself. Although she has an aversion to both Mrs Tims, the housekeeper, and Dottie, the wife of her lover Leslie, she makes great efforts to compensate for these negative feelings. She gives Mrs Tims a brooch, she tries to help Dottie to find an interest in life by introducing her to the Autobiographical Association. However, Fleur herself is treated with deep distrust by all but her friends Leslie and Wally and by Edwina. She is accused of being unwomanly by Dottie and of being evil by Sir Quentin. Altogether the novel presents a spectrum of degrees of clarity and obscurity in appreciation of character. Fleur has the capacity to respond to the truth in people and has an aversion to pretentiousness and to inauthenticity. Her judgments are intuitive and she bears no malice and harbours no resentment. Her only anger results when she finds the typescript of her novel has been stolen, and even then her only

desire is to reclaim it. She does not wish harm to the offenders. Basically her faith is reflected in her acknowledgement that life operates in terms beyond her understanding but that it offers a source of delight. She rejoices in her gift as a writer because to write celebrates what she observes and relishes as particular features of a personality or atmosphere. She rejoices 'in seeing people as they were and not only that but more than ever as they were and more and more'. It is clear that although Fleur is glad of her desire and ability to write, it is life itself that is the source of her joy. Although there is in the text no analysis of this in religious terms, the way in which Fleur's rejoicing connects with the quotations from Cellini and from Newman shows how she too is celebrating the truth. *Loitering with Intent* recounts a state of mind which is in itself an act of praise.

The faith of Nancy Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington* is mentioned only incidentally. The insight of her faith comes into being in the course of the book. Initially it is no more in her life than a habit; we are told that she repeats the Angelus daily. However, when Nancy realizes how mistaken she has been about Wanda, the Polish dressmaker, she humbly adjusts her perspective. She sees, retrospectively, that a priest could have helped Wanda and protected her from the deceptions of Hector Bartlett. Nancy's eventual readiness to admit to her own inadequacy is a strong feature of her Christian mentality. She compels herself to shake free of the identity into which she has sunk so comfortably and uses her free will to change her life. Like Fleur Talbot, Nancy has a clear appreciation of the personalities of others. But more importantly, she is able to criticize herself.

Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate* has a different temperament from either Fleur Talbot or Nancy Hawkins. Her faith is the most passionate reality of her life. For her faith she uproots herself completely from her sheltered life as an English schoolteacher and embarks on a dangerous pilgrimage. Barbara has a good mind and a strong personality; her acquaintances find her daunting. But what emerges in this narrative is Barbara's need for a deeper level of existence. Barbara does not intellectualize this feeling. It is conveyed by the compulsion she has to pursue the pilgrimage, whatever the threats and difficulties. The priest who gives a sermon at the Holy Sepulchre offers insight into Barbara's experience; he says that to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem is an instinct. He also says that the emotions aroused by it can vary, depending even on the weather. But what is essential is the disposition of the pilgrim. Even though the sites designated for reverence cannot all be authenticated: 'whether true or not our religion does not depend on it'. The certainty was that Christ

died, was buried and rose again. 'The quest for historical exactitude belongs to archaeology not to faith,' says the friar and he continues: '... nothing is neat. And what would be the point of our professing faith if it were? There's no need for faith if everything is plain to the eye. We cannot know everything perfectly because we ourselves are not perfect.' The friars listening to the sermon are extremely uneasy about it; they see their fellow as a renegade and a firebrand. They know his views are likely to get him into trouble. Barbara is too feverish to pay much attention to his words. But for the reader they supply an unprecedented account of Spark's understanding of faith which is implicit throughout her work. Barbara is in fact the embodiment of what the priest is saying; she has an instinct and a longing to come to the Holy City and it is a spiritual need which nothing else in her life, not even her love affair, can satisfy. It is clear in her experience at the Eichmann trial how she sees in her pilgrimage terms of understanding which are inaccessible to the climate of cold bureaucracy at the trial and meaningless to the mechanical figure of Eichmann who raps out his pronouncements. The depths of suffering and the horror of the holocaust are of different dimension from these.

Caroline Rose, Fleur Talbot, Nancy Hawkins and Barbara Vaughan are comprehensible only in the terms they themselves present and these are the terms of their faith. No relationship and no preoccupation is as central to their lives as their need of an insight beyond what the world offers them. It is clear that for each of them faith proves a salutary force. It provides no answers, nor theoretical resolutions, but enables them to accept their limitations and the inadequacies of their understanding. The priest in his sermon at the Holy Sepulchre cites St Paul's definition of faith: 'It is that which gives substance to our hopes, which convinces us of things we cannot see.'

The characters I have presented as 'women of power' are remarkable for their lack of any faith beyond their self-love. This self-love separates them from others except for their need of acolytes. Selina Redwood in *The Girls of Slender Means* is a central character in the book only circumstantially. Her appalling selfishness emerges in its true light when she pushes past the trapped girls to retrieve the Schiaparelli dress. Without this revealing incident, her selfishness would have been socially tolerable, and barely noticed. However, it serves to offer a spiritual depth to the book which is no longer a pleasant, atmospheric account of young girls' adventures in wartime Britain. Selina's litany of dedication to perfect poise is sinister in retrospect rather than amusing. The effect that her action has on Nicholas changes his life. This is a subtle and profound way of indicating the spiritual significance of what

initially appears to be an unimportant inoffensive mentality.

Miss Brodie's preoccupation with self holds the centre of the stage. She is overwhelming because she admits no one's terms but her own. She is totally dismissive of others and entirely unselfcritical. Her favourite girls form an enchanted circle around her; they are admitted only because they acquiesce before her. She is grotesque; her inflated image of herself dominates all things. It is unwieldy and indefinable but its power is shown through the girls' excited fantasies and through the art master's inability to paint any face but hers. However, although she is obsessed with her own prejudices, there is a certain pathos about Miss Brodie. The irony of her outlook is that she sincerely believes she is doing the right thing. To her mind, her way of teaching is not showing off; she genuinely wishes to share with her girls the insights that she believes she has received. Her hostility to her critics amongst the staff of the Marcia Blaine School is not inspired by their dislike for her personally; she senses that they are philistines and that they seek to suppress all dynamism. The muddle of Miss Brodie's mind is amplified by the tensions of the time in which she lives. On the one hand there was an important movement in the thirties to celebrate art, health and unshackled learning. Many teachers and parents of the period must have felt that these were major issues to draw to the attention of the young. However, Miss Brodie's interest in such ideas is inseparable from her need of self-assertion. Because of this, she seeks to regiment the minds of those she teaches. Sandy's denunciation of her as a fascist is not so far removed from the truth. But Miss Brodie's confusion rambles further than the political. Her notion of her own power is almost deific. Not only does she seek to influence and channel her pupils and friends as a teacher, but she plans how they are to live and what they will do. It is here that she is most dangerous. Sandy is perceptive enough to see what Miss Brodie is trying to do. She betrays her. It is no coincidence that Sandy becomes a nun; faith and insight are linked. The other girls experience a great sense of freedom once they are no longer within Miss Brodie's control.

The narrator of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* remarks that only the Catholic Church could have disciplined her 'soaring spirit'. She needs a sense of a power beyond her own so that she might orientate her enthusiasms and curb her egocentricity. Unwittingly, but dangerously, she takes people's lives into her own hands, denying them freedom. Her quest for power has taken away not only the freedom of others, but also her own: the concept of self as a prison emerges very clearly when, at the end of the day, we see her hunched, bedraggled and lonely, trying desperately to fathom out who betrayed her. Sandy points out that none

of her girls could have betrayed her unless she had betrayed them; this was in fact what she had done.

Alexandra in *The Abbess of Crewe* is the epitome of cult of self. The irony of the narrative lies in the context of the abbey. Because of the implicit absence of any clear theological or moral ethos, the abbey only functions through an outmoded power structure. The junior nuns are servile, the older nuns assert their own will in a struggle for power. Alexandra has an obscure and mystifying personality. The reader has no insight into her thoughts. She is a law unto herself. She does not communicate with the other senior nuns; she declaims, they echo. She professes that her love is English poetry. Her devotions take the form of reciting the poetry of which she is so fond. She also claims to have an awareness of her own destiny. She knows she was meant to be Abbess. Alexandra is the antithesis of Christianity; she is exclusively preoccupied with herself, she is disdainful of others and wholly lacking in compassion, she has a Calvinist conviction of predestined outcome and a diabolic conviction that it is designed in her interests. As the narrative proceeds, we find other elements in her scheming which are equally tainted; the elaborate devices 'beyond the reach of any human vocabulary' enable Alexandra to operate a surveillance designed to protect her from any foe. She ably justifies these by quoting from the Scriptures: 'we must watch and pray'. She also quotes the practice of opening nuns' letters which she says is no less of an intrusion. After Felicity has escaped from the convent and Alexandra feels more threatened, she studies Machiavelli and gives passages of Machiavelli to the nuns to read aloud at mealtimes. Alexandra's nefarious scheming has become the *raison d'être* of the Abbey. It is a closed, suffocating environment. When she is called to Rome we see her on the ship and it seems that for once she has a sense of an infinity of possibilities beyond herself.

Spark's women of power ultimately prove to be vulnerable because they will admit no law beyond their own self-interest. Jean Brodie and Alexandra assert themselves to the exclusion of all other considerations. Their empire collapses. Selina Redwood is never consciously vulnerable; however, the perspective of the novel reveals the shallowness of her mind and her inability to foster relationships; the implication is that while she might enjoy worldly success, she is spiritually empty.

It is not only the personal experience of Spark's women nor their behaviour that suggests the value of a perspective of faith to assess them. In many of Spark's novels an alternative religion is often described. These are eccentric and often dangerous. Spark's skill in

recounting the origins and effects of such cults shows her insight into the odd paths which a distorted religious sensibility may follow.

Spiritualism is portrayed in *The Bachelors*. In the structure of the novel it provides the means for Patrick Seton to manipulate his coterie. However, although Seton is undoubtedly presented as a malicious and scheming character, there is no suggestion in the text that his claim to be a medium is fraudulent. The description of his appearance and behaviour whilst going into a trance is clearly meant to convey a genuine state of semi-consciousness. He apparently has no recollection of what he says whilst in his trance. He knows that he has revealed something which profoundly disturbs Dr Lyte, but he has no idea what this was. He proceeds to use this revelation as blackmail against the doctor however. Having regained consciousness after one of his trances, he asks if he 'gave utterance'. All he had said, in fact, was 'I creep'. Patrick Seton's powers are sinister not laughable. The implication of the description of spiritualism in this book is that it does indeed tap sources which have a metaphysical reality, but that to exploit these is evil and chaotic. Ronald Bridges reflects that there are only two religions: spiritualism and Roman Catholicism. The latter provides the true points of reference to understand the forces of the spiritual dimension of existence.

Tom Wells in *Robinson* has his own superstitious cult. In his case it is quite clear that he preys for profit by marketing charms of his own invention: Ethel the Well is the most successful. This aspect of Tom Wells' character is abhorrent to January Marlow and also to Robinson himself. He is deeply irritated by Tom Wells' attempt to interest Miguel, Robinson's step son, in his superstitious object. Interestingly, Robinson also objects to January's rosary beads and is offended when she teaches the rosary to Miguel.

Muriel Spark's impatience with mindless religiosity is clear from the way in which she derides superstition of the kind encouraged by Tom Wells. She is equally scathing about the macrobiotics cult of Lise's fellow passenger, Bill. One has the impression that Spark is not mocking these characters merely on a personal level but that she is genuinely affronted by the way in which a human tendency towards religion can be distorted and corrupted. In *The Takeover* this criticism is most fully developed. Hubert Mallindaine attempts to revive a cult of the goddess Diana from whom he claims to be descended. This claim, it is pointed out, has no firmer basis than the sentimentality of his maiden aunts. It does appear that Hubert himself has an emotional conviction that he has the right to a form of priesthood because of his ancestry; talking to himself, he declares that the whole area is his because it was originally

dedicated to the worship of Diana.

Like Spark's other characters who pursue eccentric religious cults, Hubert has an eye to profit. He has no compunction in having made faked copies of Maggie's possessions and selling the originals. He too has an obsession about his own supremacy; when praying, he simply assumes God will be persuaded what to do by him. Spark wickedly suggests that many other ministers have a similar approach and regard their self-interest as a valid factor in the operation of God's will. But her real target is the charismatic movement in the Roman Catholic Church. Hubert's ability to assemble congregations who enjoy the egalitarian atmosphere of the cult and his fuzzy, histrionic nature worship, is really a form of theatre. It is basically phoney and has only a contagious emotive content. Spark implies that the charismatic movement in the Church is similar; people enjoy a relaxed, friendly atmosphere to get away from confronting the realities of life.

Muriel Spark does not write theology. There is no attempt to write a resume nor to analyse the nature or function of religion. She does, however, identify an area in human experience which relates to faith; this area is where the building of a true human identity takes place. Spark's characters do not develop in terms of their relationships with others, but in terms of their own encounters with challenge. Her presentation of life suggests an essential fragmentation, an essential incoherence. Sometimes, in order to show how substanceless is a reliance on the predictable, Spark uses an author's licence in giving her narrative a surrealist, metaphysical dimension. The disappearance of Mrs Hogg, when alone, is an example. The strange links between Fleur Talbot's novel and the events of Sir Quentin's life are another. Such themes are deliberately left unresolved. We are encouraged to think that 'all things are possible'. This, the novelist has the right to suggest, is what faith encourages.

The most impressive account of essential incoherence is that of the personal experience of Spark's characters. The maturing ; woman is able to cope with this through her faith. The woman seeking power dismisses incoherence and blurs this reality with myth. Such a quest emerges as highly comic, not just on the level of circumstances and unpredictable events, but as the result of the irony of the absolute imposition of an arbitrary and partial set of criteria.

The faith which figures so essentially in Spark's writing is not presented as an orthodox Roman Catholicism. There is little reference to following regular religious practices; when there is—for example, January Marlow's rosary, Nancy Hawkins' recitation of the Angelus—these tend to be the object of mockery, rather than to suggest piety.

There are some Catholics whose understanding of the faith is presented as quite obnoxious: Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters* and Dottie in *Loitering with Intent*. Fleur Talbot says of Dottie's faith that she was rather glad when she said she had lost it since she felt that if Dottie's faith was the true faith, then hers was false. Clearly, a veneer or a pretence of faith is as reprehensible as any other inauthenticity. Muriel Spark's respect for authenticity appears to be one of the essential criteria for faith. The characters she presents in the most sympathetic light have a high standard of honesty and integrity. Those openly reviled by Spark's narrative are fraudulent. They manipulate others and are nefarious and dishonest.

It would be quite wrong to interpret the elements of criticism of the Catholic Church in Spark's work as an indication that there is a waning of the importance of faith in her outlook. Her focus on life is witty and ironic because she refuses to present it as comprehensible in its entirety. Occasionally, such as in the Scripture readings in *The Abbess of Crewe* and in the Biblical quotations read out at one of Hubert Mallandaine's cult services by his secretary, there is a direct attempt to provide the reader with suggestions of an alternative perspective to that of the characters. But mostly Spark trusts that the very presentation of a fragmentary and bafflingly mysterious life will awake in the reader an admission that we see through a glass darkly. She expresses this perception with the rhythms and the imagery of poetry to confer on it a wonder of its own.

Aquinas and the New Europe

Kevin Doran

As the twentieth century draws to a close, Europe is the scene of what would appear to be two diametrically opposed processes of political development. We are witnessing the development of a European super-state in the West, while in the East we see the fragmentation of a major political and military alliance. Some six centuries ago, in a very different Europe, Thomas Aquinas argued that, because human beings live and act in society, there must exist some means whereby the group or society may be governed for the common good, so that it does not