

MURIEL SPARK

"Miss Valvona went to her rest. Many of the grannies followed her. Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord, meditating sometimes confidently upon Death, the first of the Four Last Things to be ever remembered."

"Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions." Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* is the story of a rooming house in wartime London that might have been an exercise in slick magazine fiction were it not for the author's uncanny knack for suggesting an importance in their doings of which the doers are only imperfectly aware.

I was one of those who was disappointed when Muriel Spark's autobiography *Curriculum Vitae* appeared a couple years ago. On reflection, I realize that my disappointment stemmed from the fact that so much of what she had to tell us about herself she had already used in her fiction. But it was gratifying to be given more on the two enigmatic lines that appear in the little bio in the Penguin edition of her work. "Mrs. Spark became a Roman Catholic in 1954. She has one son."

The son was the fruit of an unwise marriage entered into when she was still in her teens. It took her to Africa where it developed that her husband was insane and she was lucky to escape with her life. She returned to wartime Britain where her parents looked out for her son and she went

to work in London.

About the conversion she tells us less. Coming out of the Scotland she gives us in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Spark would have lived in the atmosphere of religion, and there was a bit of Jewish blood as well. But her conversion seems to have been the catalyst that turned her into a novelist.

All but one or two of her novels are less than the usual length of the genre. *Memento Mori* was her second and one of its three mottos is taken from the Penny Catechism

Q. What are the four last things to be ever remembered?

A. The four last things to be ever remembered are Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven.

The television adaptation of *Memento Mori* brought Muriel Spark to a wide audience who will be glad to hear that there are many more stories every bit as good in Spark's repertoire.

Among those who were dazzled by Spark's debut as a novelist was Evelyn Waugh whose praise is as platinum. Waugh's *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* appeared at the same time as *Memento Mori* and the older writer was generous -- and accurate -- enough to say that her book handled their more or less common theme far better than did his. There are important similarities between their work on the level of style and technique.

Mastery in writing is manifest when the writer trusts the scene he

puts before us to have the desired effect. The narrator does not react for us, the dialogue is not studded with adverbs or heated substitutes for 'he said' and 'she said.' Like Waugh, Spark can put the grotesque and horrible before us without comment because comment would be superfluous in so artful a narrative.

You might think that this would create the impression of a disengaged narrator, an omniscient onlooker, unmoved by what is being said. But it doesn't. Not only is this the most effective way to achieve an emotional response from the reader -- to show what elicits the emotion and trust it will come -- it is also a very effective way to suggest the something over and above the surface action which is Muriel Spark's abiding theme. The Four Last Things only make sense if there is a life beyond this one and if what is done here decides what we will be there. Not that Spark is coy about it.

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That is the the ending of *Memento Mori*. Here is the end of the *Ballad of Peckham Rye*. A girl married two hours has just said she feels she's been married twenty years.

"He thought this a pity for a girl of eighteen. But it was a sunny day

for November, and, as he drove swiftly past the Rye, he saw the children playing there and the women coming home from work with their shopping bags, the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, all the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this."

Her comic effects are conveyed in the same way, deadpan, trusting the reader to get it.

But emotion and comedy are always lightly at the service of that other world than this one. Like Flannery O'Connor, Muriel Spark is a Catholic writer who does not rely on a lot of Church lore. But it is noteworthy that in a society secularizing itself at a dizzying rate she should insist on making her conversion known.

There was a stretch in her career when Spark got a little too arty for me, employing a sparseness and obliquity that seemed self-referential. What a relief it was when *A Far Cry From Kensington* appeared. We were whisked back into the world of *The Girls of Slender Means*, a world both funnier and sadder and more than itself than that of *The Hot House by the East River*, *The Driver's Seat* and *Not To Disturb*. Her attempt to transpose Watergate into a convent, *The Abbess of Crewe*, is my least favorite among her novels. It feeds the worldly notion of what the religious life is, and relies for its effect on a very simple version of a complicated partisan frenzy. Still, there is a carryover from that novel to *Symposium*,

which it would be difficult not to like. But it was *A Far Cry From Kensington* that reminded me how very good Muriel Spark is.

Is a novelist's imagination tied down to a certain span of years, so that the best work is done when the story is laid then? A case could be made that Waugh's years are the 1930s but I would not agree: it is the period of World War II. I think the same is true of Spark; it is the London of wartime, life lived under the constant threat of falling bombs, mortal danger as ordinary as getting up and going to work.

"So great was the noise during the day that I used to lie awake at night listening to the silence. Eventually, I fell asleep contented, filled with soundlessness, but while I was awake I enjoyed the experience of darkness, thought, memory, sweet anticipations. I heard the silence."

That is the sound of a writer returning to the country of her imagination and it prepares us for the quirky, funny, frightening things to follow, a deft and lightly told story that puts us in mind of so much more. *The Four Last Things*, for example.