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The Right Woman for the Job?: Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* (1984)

The Muriel Spark Centenary in 2018 (#murielspark100) affords an opportunity to look back on Spark's achievements and forwards to ways of making those achievements more widely known, to reflect and to resituate. Arguably the most important Scottish writer after Burns, Scott, and Stevenson, Spark remains relatively neglected, the sheer diversity of her oeuvre appreciated only by her constant readers. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* still stands as the *crème de la crème*, but beyond *Brodie* her sparkling legacy includes another twenty-one novels that still await the critical editions they so clearly merit, as well as poems, plays, short stories, critical essays and biographies, the latter containing the elements of a theory of art as rich and complex as any attempted by James Joyce or Samuel Beckett. To have read all of Spark is an achievement in itself, but also a spur to share that experience and to try to convey the impact and significance of her extensive portfolio. Here I want to focus on one novel, her seventeenth, that captures beautifully her fusion of faith and fiction. She is, after all, a writer who claimed that her conversion to Catholicism opened the door to her life as a novelist (she was already a gifted critic, poet and short story writer).

In the Orwellian year Spark addressed once more the problem that had engaged her for almost three decades, from her first novel onwards, the problem of evil in a world overseen by a benevolent creator. Spark herself had written on the *Book of Job* before she became a novelist, and it's the Biblical text that lies behind much of her work. Indeed, she had planned a whole book on Job, but only got as far as an article before her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957).¹ *The Only Problem* (1984) sees the rich and reclusive Harvey Gotham, thirty-five-year old heir to Gotham's Canadian Salmon, retire to the French countryside to complete a study of the *Book of Job*, which he believes to be "not only as important, as amazing, a poem as it was generally considered to be, but also the pivotal book of the Bible" (29).² The backdrop to Harvey's scholarly work is a theme familiar from another Spark novel, *Territorial Rights*: terrorism and responsibility. The police suspect Harvey's estranged wife, Effie, ten years his junior, of being a dangerous terrorist guilty of murder, a member of the FLE (*Fronte de la Libération de l'Europe*). Harvey finds this hard to believe, though he had walked out on her for stealing a bar of chocolate and justifying it with some political rhetoric: "Why shouldn't we help ourselves? These multinationals and monopolies are capitalising on us, and two-thirds of the world is suffering" (15). But is the bar of chocolate merely the thin end of the wedge? Is Effie the victim of a Patty

Hearst-like kidnapping? Or is she really a terrorist? The basic plot of the book, the writer-husband beaver away in the woods while the terrorist-wife wreaks havoc, is really just a hanger from which Spark suspends a great deal of commentary about good and evil, love and hate. Hearing of a proposed film entitled *The Love-Hate Relationship*, Harvey declares impatiently:

“If there’s anything I can’t stand it’s a love-hate relationship [...] The element of love in such a relation simply isn’t worthy of the name. It boils down to hatred pure and simple in the end. Love comprises among other things a desire for the well-being and spiritual freedom of the one who is loved. There’s an objective quality about love. Love-hate is obsessive, it is possessive. It can be evil in effect.” (18)

Harvey is full of such pronouncements. His work is the prism through which he views all the events around him. He is also full of subtle distinctions. When a police officer describes him as scholarly, Harvey responds: “No, studious. I can afford to study and speculate without achieving results” (86). In that sense, *The Only Problem* is a study in evil. It is not the scholarly commission Spark never fulfilled.

In *The Only Problem*, there are some very strong echoes of *The Comforters*, with its Typing Ghost, including this passage:

It was nine-fifteen when the telephone rang. This time it was from London. At the same time the doorbell rang. Harvey had been dreaming that his interrogator was one of those electric typewriters where the typeface can be changed by easy manipulation; the voice of the interrogator changed like the type, and in fact was one and the same, now roman, now élite, now italics. In the end, bells on the typewriter rang to wake him up to the phone and the doorbell. (93)

Where does responsibility begin and end? Harvey asks: “Am I responsible for my wife’s debts? Her wounded, her dead?” (104) From his high ground of study into the only problem worth discussing, he finds the state’s preoccupation with terrorism and terrorism’s preoccupation with the state a distraction. Listening to a radio newsflash about a bulletin from the shadowy FLE, he reflects:

The gang was going to liberate Europe from its errors, “Errors of society, errors of the system.” Most of all, liberation from the

diabolical institutions of the *gendarmérie* and the brutality of the *Brigade Criminelle*. It was much the same as every other terrorist announcement Harvey had ever read. “The multinationals and the forces of the reactionary imperialist powers...” It was like an alarm clock that ceases to wake the sleeper who, having heard it morning after morning, simply puts out a hand and switches it off without even opening his eyes. (104)

Harvey admits that he will never get to the bottom of the *Book of Job*: “It doesn’t matter; it’s a poem” (132). And there’s a poetic aspect to Spark’s novels that makes plot summary redundant. Such overviews never do justice to the deeper dilemmas or the texture of the writing. Through all the police investigation, terrorist activity, and solitary study, Spark threads a needlework of fine stitching and some silvery sentences:

Stewart and Harvey crossed the Place Stanislas at Nancy. The rain had stopped and a silvery light touched the gilded gates at the corners of the square, it glittered on the lamp-posts with their golden garlands and crown-topped heads, and on the bright and lacy iron-work of the balconies of the *hôtel de ville*. (137)

To Stewart’s comment on the square’s loveliness “out of season”, Harvey replies: “It’s supposed to have crowds [...] That’s what it was evidently made for”. Harvey’s tendency to look at life through the lens of the *Book of Job* is not to everyone’s liking. It displeases the police who are exercised by the loss of one of their number, a death that Harvey depersonalizes in a meditation on the nature of death. Asked if he loves his wife, Harvey says that’s a personal question, only for the interrogating officer to bark: “It was a personal question for the policeman who was killed”. Harvey, rather than being put off his sublime stride, replies at length:

“I’m not sure that death is personal in the sense of being in love. So far as we know, we don’t feel death. We know the fear of death, we know the process of dying. From the outside it looks the most personal of phenomena. But isn’t death the very negation of the personal, therefore strictly speaking impersonal? A dead body is the most impersonal thing I can think of. Unless one believes in the continuity of personality in its terrestrially recognizable form, as opposed to life-after-death which is something else. Many disbelieve in life after death, of course, but –” (141)

The police don't want to hear Harvey philosophize – “This is not the place” – but for Harvey there's only the problem. Every subject of conversation comes back to the only problem:

“One thing that the *Book of Job* teaches us [...] is the futility of friendship in times of trouble. That is perhaps not a reflection on friends but on friendship. Friends mean well, or make as if they do. But friendship itself is made for happiness, not trouble.” (150)

Harvey's musings can tax the reader's patience at times, or the critic as cop, but among his ruminations is a key passage on the value of his own work, and, by extension – since Harvey is ever prone to enlargement – the nature of study more generally. They also serve who only sit and study, or as Harvey puts it:

We all need something to suffer about. But *Job*, my work on *Job*, all interrupted and neglected, probed into and interfered with: that is experience, too; real experience, not vicarious, as is often assumed. To study, to think, is to live and suffer painfully. (153)

This is the key to Harvey's reading habits, and to his apparently uncaring or emotionally cold response to the actual death of a police officer, or his apparently blasé attitude to his wife's alleged criminal activities.³ Harvey's observations on love and death, friendship and marriage, though readers will respond in different ways to them, smack of wit and irony arising from deep study. When he refers to his past hope that his wife might come back, it's pointed out to him that he left her, not the other way around, but Harvey refuses the distinction:

“In cases of desertion in marriage, it is always difficult to say who is the deserter. There is a kind of constructional desertion, you know. Technically, yes, I left her. She also had left me. These things have to be understood.” (166)

Some readers will see Harvey's hair-splitting and nit-picking as ultimately self-serving – and even author-serving, since Spark left her husband after he had left her no choice – but character and author might see it serving a larger purpose, that of elucidating the *Book of Job*. The stolen bar of chocolate that prompted Harvey to walk out on his wife and embark on his study is incidental to the police: “A bar of chocolate isn't a dead policeman [...] We are looking for a political fanatic, not a bar of chocolate” (164, 167). But for Harvey it's all of a piece, all part of the big picture, and a piece in the puzzle that is the only problem. Harvey will

insist that he “saw the terrorist in Effie long ago” (176), and such absurd reasoning reminds us of Thomas de Quincey’s line on murder. Here, the line goes that stealing a bar of chocolate is a dead giveaway for terrorist potential. *The Only Problem* is about two hearts, the fanatic and the student, that can at times beat as one, although Harvey Gotham, in his infinite wisdom, might want to dispute that.

I said at the beginning that Spark’s biographies – more so than her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992) – expound a theory of art. Her 1953 study of John Masefield is a case in point.⁴ In her introduction to the 1991 revised edition, Spark wrote:

Looking back at this work I wrote on Masefield, I feel a large amount of my writing on him can be applied generally; it is in many ways a statement of my position as a literary critic and I hope some readers will recognize it as such. Certainly I have changed over the intervening years, but my basic tenets remain surprisingly (even to me) constant. (viii)

With this claim in mind Spark’s closing statement in her study of Masefield repays examination:

John Masefield’s achievements in fiction are, essentially, a poet’s. He uses words with the utmost sensitivity. He occupies himself and engages the reader in the minutiae of every phenomenon he undertakes to write about – the smallest details of any profession or craft of mankind belonging to any period in history or any place are not overlooked by him. In this way he gets at the essentials of a situation, perhaps paradoxically. That is Masefield’s secret. Some novelists lay bare their story by making the broad, generalizing sweep. Some concentrate on dialogue to bring forth the essence of their tale. Masefield goes into detail after detail until the reader is closely acquainted with the subject of the story, and until the relevance of those details, carefully, deliberately chosen after all, becomes apparent, and the essence of Masefield’s work, simple and noble, emerges. (175)

Muriel also “goes into detail after detail” in her search for ... what? The truth? The story? The mystery? The sacred? The self? All of the above? One thing’s for sure, if the Devil is in the detail, then so too is the Dame. In her centenary year, while necessarily “making the broad, generalizing sweep” we should appreciate Spark’s jeweller’s eye for detail, her studiousness, and in celebrating her achievement we should focus on her

hidden gems as well as her more prominent pearls, searching beyond *Brodie* for the rest of the cream. The only problem is, with such riches, where to start?

Willy Maley is Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Muriel Spark for Starters* (Capercaillie Books, 2008), and co-editor, with Michael Gardiner, of *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

¹ Muriel Spark, 'The Mystery of Job's Suffering: Jung's New Interpretation Examined', *Church of England Newspaper* (15 April 1955), p. 7.

² All references are to *The Only Problem* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1984; London: Granada Publishing, 1985). Spark's epigraph is from *Book of Job* 13.3: "Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God". For a painstaking discussion see Hugh Pyper, 'The Reader in Pain: *Job* as Text and Pretext', *Literature and Theology* 7, 2 (1993): 111-129.

³ In her early co-authored study of Wordsworth Spark remarked that the poet "seemed to require some profound emotional disturbance before the universe appeared to him in vital and imaginative terms". Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford, "Wordsworth the Person", in *Tribute to Wordsworth: A Miscellany of Opinion for the Centenary of the Poet's Death* (London and New York: Wingate, 1950), p. 16. Yet Hugh Pyper's conclusion in his otherwise excellent essay on *The Only Problem* appears to go against the grain of Spark's sense of suffering for her art, as he sees the novel as in part a meditation on "survivor's guilt": "To write a monograph like Harvey's, or a novel like *The Only Problem*, or indeed this paper argues a level of privilege, of freedom from the causes of suffering which may prompt the question 'Why not me?'. Perhaps like Harvey we have to persuade ourselves that suffering the guilt of privilege is sufficient to give us some inkling of what it might be like to be without that privilege of protection. Part of the pain of the reader is the knowledge of the vicarious nature of the reader's pain" (125). One could argue conversely that Spark's vision goes beyond vicariousness and that the relationship between suffering and art remains the key to her own writing and to her criticism. She really did suffer for her art.

⁴ Muriel Spark, *John Masefield* (London: Peter Nevill, 1953; revised edition, London: Hutchinson, 1991; London: Pimlico, 1992).