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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by Jeanne Devoize and Pamela Valette, "Narrative Techniques in the Short Story", Conference January 21, 1989, First published in *JSSE* n°13, 1989.

1 Muriel Spark's versatility — a novelist with some twenty titles, a playwright, a biographer and literary critic, and of course a short story writer — her delightful unconventionality, the incisiveness of her wit, her narrative power, are only a few of the traits that make of her one of the best loved and most widely-read British writers of our times.

Jeanne DEVOIZE: How did you become a writer originally? How did you decide it would be your profession?

Muriel SPARK: Well, I was quite a child when I started writing and I wrote poetry. I always thought of writing poetry. But gradually, when I was about 30, I started writing narrative poetry which told a story, and from that I moved into the short story, encouraged by the fact I won a prize with my first short story which was called "The Seraph and the Zambezi". As I won this prize, I thought it was a good idea and I got more and more interested in the short story. Then, a publisher asked me to write a novel and I thought I would try that. Meantime I had collected my short stories together and I published the novel and the short stories and I decided not to do any other sort of work whereas up to that point I needed to have a job as well. That's how by about the age of 35, I was already writing as a professional. It took a long time because I had a son to bring up and various economic family difficulties. It wasn't too long after I decided, that I got started.

J.D.: I seem to understand that you prefer the novel to the short story.

M.S.: I feel more at home with the novel, I'll tell you. I feel I'd like to write short stories. But unless I have got a novel going always at home, waiting for me, a novel ready and started, I'm not happy. I feel there's so much in life that I want to put into this novel,

whatever it is, the one I'm doing. While one is writing a novel, it's amazing how one is a magnet for experience, the sort of experience that you need, just for that novel. An event will happen, one will meet the sort of people, just the one needs. It seems to be like that. It is not so of course but it's because one is looking for certain experiences.

J.D.: Have you ever written a short story while you were writing a novel?

M.S.: Oh yes. I very often write short stories. All my short stories have been written recently while I was writing a novel. And I can't think that I won't write always two or three short stories every year. Something occurs to me that has got nothing to do with the novel I am writing. It occurs to me in short story form. Or a title. One idea. One single theme. And I'll elaborate on that. I think "Oh, that would make a good short story." And I make a few notes and play with it.

J.D.: Do you feel that one genre is superior to another?

M.S.: No, in a way, I feel the short story is superior, it's more difficult. If one is a perfectionist — it's not that I am exactly a perfectionist — but I like to get the very best out of every form. I really do think the short story is something by itself and it's superior to the novel in many ways. It's nearer to poetry and likely to have a longer life sometimes.

J.D.: Among your own short stories, which are your favourites?

M.S.: "The Portobello Road", I think, is my best. Or, maybe there was one which I wrote called "The Executor", not long ago, which I think is up to the standard. What I think about the short story is that it leaves more also to the reader's imagination. Films are made of my books and stories. I don't make them. But if I were a director of a film, I would rather have a short story to work on than a novel because there is more field for imagination, more scope.

J.D.: You alluded earlier on to the Scots, to Henry James as your favourite authors.

M.S.: Well, in the field of the short story, there is also Guy de Maupassant. Henry James, of course, is the outstanding one. Let me think of the ones that are really terribly important to me: the Irish writer, Mary Lavin — she's awfully good, I think —, Sean O'Faolain. The Irish are very good, they really are. There's Edgar Allan Poe, who is thrilling. Wilkie Collins is very good with short stories. More recent ones, I don't know very well. I must admit I haven't read a great deal. In that Collection *Winter's Tales* that comes out every so and so, there are always one or two very good ones. I can't think of any just at the moment. The Borges ones. Yes, he is always reliable.

J.D.: Do you feel you belong to any particular literary tradition, yourself?

M.S.: Yes, I think I would belong, in the writing of prose, to a literary tradition which is connected with the belletrists like Max Beerbohm, a humourist. On the level of thought, Pritchett and that sort of fantasy. I am very interested in event, following event, following event. Also, you wouldn't think so, but I owe a lot to Proust. I read Proust over and over again. What would we do if we didn't have Proust? Can you imagine a literary world without Proust? It's a drug. It works. Beautiful.

Pamela VALETTE: On the subject of literary influences, you just said you wrote narrative poems. Were you inspired by somebody?

M.S.: Well, I did write a book on the poet laureate John Masefield because, for a long time before I wrote books, I wrote critical studies, on Mary Shelley, Wordsworth and John Masefield. Well, John Masefield was a narrative poet. He told us stories in verse, he

was a ballad writer. And then I was writing ballads, long stories, stories in verse, so I could see I had this urge for narrative, for telling a story.

P.V.: You lived in Central Africa, didn't you?

M.S.: Yes, it was Zimbabwe, Southern Rhodesia.

P.V.: What was your experience in Central Africa? Were you in a town?

M.S.: I lived in two towns: Bulaware and Salisbury. Now it's Bulaware and Herare. And sometimes in absolutely isolated spots. My husband was a teacher and we were moving around a great deal.

P.V.: What sorts of contacts did you have? You didn't teach yourself?

M.S.: I didn't teach myself, no. But my son was born there. I didn't have very much contact with young people, except people of my own age. I was in my teens myself.

P.V.: Many of your stories take place in Africa.

M.S.: Yes, it left a very strong impression but I wrote only one thing there and it was a poem. The poem was called "The Go-Away Bird," which later I wrote a story on, but on a different theme.

P.V.: There are two short story writers of our time who wrote a great deal about Africa: Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. Do you know them?

M.S.: I didn't meet Nadine Gordimer, but I do know Doris Lessing. I loved her earlier work. I preferred the earlier about Africa to her later: *The Grass Is Singing* is beautiful.

P.V.: But how would you compare your vision of Africa to theirs?

M.S.: Doris Lessing is very much more political than I am.

P.V.: And Nadine Gordimer too.

M.S.: Yes, she is, of course, she's later, younger and also has a reason to be more political, she comes from South Africa where there was a political situation. In Rhodesia, there was a colonial situation. It wasn't quite so oppressive. South Africans are perfectly educated people. There's no reason why they should go in one door while the white people go in another door. Perfectly ridiculous. But the Blacks in Rhodesia were extremely primitive at that time, sweet people but extremely primitive. There was no political situation, there was no movement in the late 30's, no freedom movement, although a lot of us felt they should get a better deal, better schools than they had. The law wasn't too bad. There certainly weren't oppressive laws; it was under British rule, which wasn't wonderful, but it wasn't too bad. But Doris Lessing has a more political mind. She is a communist and has a much more political mind. She is a very good writer. She's a communist, though, or was. I don't know whether she still's got her party card. I think so.

P.V.: Were you still in Africa during the last war?

M.S.: Yes, I was in Africa, I was stuck there. We had to go to South Africa until 1944 and then I got home and I was in the Foreign Office.

P.V.: And do you find the war and the work in the Foreign Office had an influence on what you wrote?

M.S.: I think so because we were doing propaganda, inventing lies, which suited me all right. Inventing lies to mix up with truth. Mixing it all up and then putting it out for the German soldiers to swallow, to try and say one thing and then it was not true at all,

or half of it was true. Anything to demoralize the German troops, in France, on the radio. And so, of course, that job suited me all right. It was inventive.

P.V.: I don't remember if among your short stories, there is one that recalls those times.

M.S.: Yes, there is: "The Poet's House." It's a strange thing. I had not written sequels. But I had written two essays on that; one is autobiographical; and the other is reflection on having written an autobiographical piece and a story. It was Louis McNeice's house. Another thing which affected me during the war is, while I was there, a school-friend of mine — she wasn't a close friend — was murdered. She looked very like me and that was the basis of my story "Pan-pan, tu es morte," "Bang-bang, you're dead," the basis of it. In the hotel where I was staying, this girl was killed. I heard it. I heard the bangs. That was a terrible experience. She lived where I lived in Edinburgh. We looked very much alike. Altogether this was the basis later on for a story.

J.D.: What, after all that, do you think are the main values that remain with you?

M.S.: The main values are really spiritual. I'll tell you that wartime in Africa was not very nice. People were coming there for air training schemes and everything, people who really couldn't cope with the freedom of life in Africa, having a lot of servants and everything. So in fact, I wanted to get back home. I liked Africa because there were beautiful birds, beasts, flowers, but I didn't think the white people that I met were so very nice. It's not because they were oppressive or anything. I just didn't like them. And I didn't like the Blacks either. There was nobody I liked to talk to. There was just nobody. And the English when they get together are very pretentious, you know, in small villages. So it wasn't a life that I could continue with.

J.D.: Do you think there's anything left of your education in Scotland in you?

M.S.: Oh yes. You see I love the border ballads. I have just been writing my autobiography. I have written 10 000 words of it, which brings me up to the time before I went to school. I tell how we spoke two different languages. Scottish and English. The effect of the Scottish border ballads on me was very, very important from the point of view of how I write, how I look at things, the bite, the malice, the hardship, the harshness, the softness, whatever it is. It had a big effect, ineradicable, from the start.

J.D.: Did you receive a religious education?

M.S.: No, as a matter of fact, I did not have a great deal of religious education. I think that school was nominally Presbyterian, but in fact it was progressive rather. And it was deeper than that. This border ballad savagery was what appealed to me, a much earlier state of being. Historically, I was very, very attracted to that.

P.V.: You were taught the border ballads at school or at home?

M.S.: At school and at home. Yes. I had the border ballad from a very early age.

J.D.: Now, I have made an attempt at trying to guess what sort of a person you were through reading some of your novels and short stories and I would like you to tell us whether I am right or not. I thought you were a very independent sort of person.

M.S.: I think so, yes.

J.D.: Not very sentimental.

M.S.: No, I am not very sentimental.

J.D.: I would say you probably hate any kind of vulgarity or hypocrisy.

M.S.: I don't like that, no, it's true.

J.D.: There is something perhaps slightly obsessional in your personality?

M.S.: Absolutely. Oh yes. I get an obsession. I am not paranoid against people. I get an obsession about something I want to do and I can't get rid of it till I have done it or found it. I am very obsessional by nature.

J.D.: I thought perhaps, at times, you rather enjoy shocking people?

M.S.: I like to make people think, you know. I really do. I don't like to give the wrong impression to people by hiding anything about myself. The thing is, if one speaks too much about oneself, one gives the wrong impression. They put the wrong weight on you.

J.D.: What about your fascination for the uncanny?

M.S.: Oh yes. That's bound up with the border ballads and this Celtic twilight-feeling.

J.D.: Yes, I felt there was a Celtic influence in some of them. I was wondering whether the experience in Central Africa, through putting you in contact with different mores and a different culture, perhaps did not encourage that as well.

M.S.: Perhaps. I must tell you that the time I spent in Central Africa was very unhappy and I had great personal problems. One way or another I had responsibilities and problems. I don't know how I faced them at the time. It wasn't till afterwards. It hit me, you know. So that in fact Africa didn't make a deep impression on me. To me, it was the dark continent. Very much.

P.V.: Did you ever hear about witchcraft?

M.S.: Oh yes. The witch doctors come back now, I think. Now they've got independance, obviously they would come back. They were dying out because there were lots of missionaries. The missionaries were not bad people, you know. They did a lot towards educating the black people, giving them some self respect, and help, and various things. But in fact, there was a war in Rhodesia, a war of independance and the witch-doctors are back again. They got rid of, they massacred a lot of the missionaries.

J.D.: I got the impression that at times those uncanny, either phenomena or odd characters that you create are a source of anguish or is it that writing is a means of getting rid of the anguish that sometimes they suggest.

M.S.: It could be. It could be. After a while, of course, whatever the original impulse. There is a mutation. When one succeeds in writing it becomes a habit and a happy habit. Things change but one goes on doing the same things for a different reason, the same activity. An original activity is very often based on all sorts of things, a sense of injustice, resentment, humiliation, all sorts of reasons why an artist becomes impelled to express himself. However that changes and then one expresses what one has to express not for oneself but for everybody or hopes that it's for everybody, not for one's own feelings, but for everybody.

J.D.: I seem to feel also that friendship is very important for you.

M.S.: Yes.

J.D.: There's several stories I read which suggest that when you meet people again after a long time, there's always this fear or awareness of the changes that have occurred in them.

M.S.: Yes, yes. I think this is true that people are sometimes quite unrecognizable and yet the nucleus of the person is there. It's very often the case when one sees one after a long time. For instance, in "The Twins" and the story about old people in *MementoMori*. This is what Proust did.

P.V.: You said the other day about friends that you hadn't seen for a long time and the way you thought it was best to leave them, not see them again, to keep the happy memories.

M.S.: Yes, sometimes it is, but sometimes one looks different oneself and it rather seems as if a veil has been painted over them, they're blurred, and sometimes they are more charming. Life has mellowed them. They've become more interesting sometimes.

P.V.: To come back to the bizarre, there's quite a number of ghosts in your stories.

M.S.: Yes.

P.V.: Do you half believe in them or in an after-life?

M.S.: Yes, I do. But not in the sense that one could possibly describe it. I have never seen a ghost. I have never had a real psychic experience that I felt a ghost in the room although I am sensitive to atmospheres, vibes as they call it. But I do think that this expresses something that can't be expressed, in any other form. The after-life exists but not in the form that you can say that the word "after" or the word "life" has any meaning. But it exists because we almost feel that it does in the way of what we've made of ourselves, the human race and its possibilities. Ghosts exist and we are haunted, whether we like it or not in the sense that it can only be expressed by a physical presence, or a ghost, but in fact, I do believe in the presence of something that you can call a ghost but not in the physical outline. I don't see any other way in which you can express this actuality, and I can't deny the actuality simply because there is no other way to express it.

P.V.: It's something immaterial. Perhaps what goes on in our subconscious.

M.S.: Yes, in our subconscious, something psychological, immaterial or...

P.V.: In "The House of the Famous Poet." I was struck by this sort of "abstract funeral" and the soldier who appears again and again...

M.S.: Yes, that's the one I wrote about because I felt I should explain and I wrote an essay on that story, and then I wrote a reflexion on what actually happened. I did go to Louis McNeice's house and I think I had the sensation of a dying culture or a dying event. You see, there were some very near hits. The bombs were falling and there was this Morrison shelter. That Morrison shelter was a shelter built in a bed and with a steel roof over it. There was the feeling that there could have been a direct hit at any moment and I remember we went to a pub with this girl for a drink and there was a Cockney girl who was swearing at the Germans in the sky, as they were, and the feeling was that it was only an abstraction. The fact that it was confusing made me write twice about it, once to give the factual background and the other to show the connexion between the poet's house and then my reaction to it. The two things.

P.V.: The girl, when she realizes who the poet is, runs away...

M.S.: Yes...

P.V.: Don't you think she may have a sort of presentiment, the intuition that death is hanging over the house. Finally the house is bombed after she's gone and the poet has come back...

M.S.: Yes. The house, in fact, was not bombed. What happened — but this was shortly after I had written the story — Louis Mc Neice died, which I wouldn't have been aware of — but maybe I sensed it. That was in the 50's, but the story takes place during the war.

P.V.: And you never forgot the house...

M.S.: Oh no, no... The house made a very deep impression on me because I went around touching all the pencils and it was most fascinating. I did not touch anything as such. I didn't move anything, I didn't snoop but... I am very fascinated by people’s houses, actually.

P.V.: I would have thought that perhaps when you wrote in the first person, you felt more involved, but you said earlier it wasn’t the case.

M.S.: No. If I write in the first person, it’s generally because I want to draw sympathy for that person. I think a first person narrator draws more sympathy than in an objective story where it's all in the third person. But very often I try to put myself in somebody else’s skin, totally different. Sometimes, I write as if I was a seamstress, a dressmaker in one of my stories. That’s where the “I” comes in, the first person. But the third person very often is my own experience. But then I feel more free, I feel less embarrassed when I can say “he” or “she” or “this happened.” But the only time that I’ve known a first person narrator not to be really sympathetic is in Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* where the first person narrator is supposed to be awful.

P.V.: Of course it can be a way of being detached, but on the other hand the first person narrator more or less judges those she sees, shows them as she sees them and often doesn’t let the reader make up his own mind about the characters so that he can’t help seeing them through the eyes of the narrator.

For example in “The Pawnbroker's Wife,” which is so funny, those people are frauds but they get away with it and everybody is afraid of them. I felt that the narrator was aware of all this but immensely amused by those women...

M.S.: Yes, that’s right, she egged them on and finally admired their craftiness, their art.

P.V.: Well, don’t you think we might have seen those characters as unpleasant if it hadn’t been for the first person narrator?

M.S.: Oh yes, certainly she makes the reader see them through her tolerant view, her tolerant humour. But when I say that I write in the third person more of my own experience, it’s rather like some people who are able to speak with a mask. The third person is a mask and then one is freer to speak of one’s own experience. In the first person, I feel I am wearing the mask of somebody else.

P.V.: For example in A Far Cry from Kensington.

M.S.: Yes, it’s really somebody else, imagined, although there are my experiences, too; my experiences really put on to somebody else, not *all* my experiences, there are the people’s too. In the first person I am another person.

P.V.: The other main characteristic of your fiction is humour and irony, therefore leading to a satirical view of things.

M.S.: That is Scottish. Maybe I’ve got too much of it. I’ll never be a good romantic writer.

P.V.: It’s very difficult to pinpoint what makes it so funny.

M.S.: Humour is generally a matter of language.

P.V.: On the other hand, I find you show little tenderness for most of your characters.

M.S.: Well, maybe I don’t, not in the stories. Maybe for the old people in *Memento Mori*... It’s difficult for me to show sympathy for people who are fortunate. I don’t know why.

P.V.: You show a certain sympathy for definite types of characters, for example in The Bachelors, people who show honesty, sincerity and courage. The epileptic character in The

Bachelors has his own sort of honesty and courage and he doubts, he questions himself, he is modest.

M.S.: I deliberately made an intelligent character of him.

P.V.: I would say that when you describe your characters, you have no illusions about them. In a way, you are rather skeptical.

M.S.: Maybe I think so. Probably that's Scottish too. Maybe too much.

P.V.: I feel you don't seem to expect too much of your characters. You take them as they are, you don't expect them to have admirable qualities.

M.S.: No, I don't. I don't know why that is. I am not very good at portraying nobility, noble qualities. I don't think I have ever tried it really.

P.V.: Finally, you remain rather detached.

M.S.: I don't know. Not always detached. But I do think that there is a lot of human qualities that I haven't yet managed to portray. I always can in the future, you know, one is always thinking in different terms.

P.V.: I felt in The Bachelors and in other stories too, that you were annoyed by the silliness of women.

M.S.: Yes, the women who let themselves be taken in by spiritualism.

P.V.: On the contrary, you have a deep loathing for other characters who have a sort of unhealthy and morbid nastiness —and then you're not at all detached.

M.S.: Yes. The homosexuals, fakes.

P.V.: In The Bachelors, you have a strong sense of evil and also in A Far Cry from Kensington.

M.S.: Yes, I think I did. The same type of character appears in the two novels. It's very difficult to portray pure good. A bite, malice: it sharpens every form of art. There has to be some.

J.D.: I had a general impression of pessimism.

M.S.: I don't think I am a pessimist, really.

J.D.: I was thinking you seem to suggest that one cannot escape one's education.

M.S.: You mean, predestination.

J.D.: Yes, as if you were caught up in the mesh of your own education. I was thinking of that beautiful short story "You should have seen the mess."

M.S.: They liked that in England a great deal. They are always broadcasting it. It's just really a sketch of a horrible puritanical little girl. You know, they go on like this in England. Maybe I'm on the gloomy side or pessimistic, but I do think we should all take it cheerfully. I do hope my literature shows a certain cheerfulness or humour, a certain philosophical cheerfulness.

J.D.: I was thinking also of Robinson. I was very much interested in Robinson. Whereas in Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, optimism is the dominating note, it is definitely not the case with your Robinson.

M.S.: O yes! Robinson himself is a very pessimistic type, very gloomy.

J.D.: I was struck by the way you very seldom use a moral vocabulary. Usually it's a concrete vocabulary and although the story may be moralizing, there's no moral vocabulary as such.

M.S.: I leave that to be reconstructed. No, I never take a moral attitude or if I do, I mean it. It's suggested in some particular way. That's achieved by leaving out a lot of adverbs.

P.V.: Much of what you say is implicit in fact. Your language is rather elusive and concise.

M.S.: One should really leave something for the reader to construct, something individual so that every reader should get something special for himself, I think. I hope so.

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