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Literary Remains: Muriel Spark, Auto/Biography, and the Archive

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Literary Remains: Muriel Spark, Auto/Biography, and the Archive

This essay explores Muriel Spark's archival practice as a form of auto/biography, charting the relationship between Spark's archives and her published work, and inquiring into the place of archives in literary and cultural studies: What are we doing in writers' archives? And what is the archive doing *here*?

Keywords: archives; auto/biography; truth; memory

My Madeleine is an empty notebook.

—Muriel Spark, "My Madeleine"¹

Introduction: "The blank page"

In the special collections reading room of the McFarlin Library, Tulsa, I'd been studying the autograph draft of Muriel Spark's *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988). The novel's narrator, usually referred to by herself and others as "Mrs Hawkins", reflects on her experiences some thirty years earlier on the fringes of literary London in the post-war years, when she had lived in a "rooming-house"² in Kensington, run by the affectionately drawn character of Milly. As so often in Spark, the title keys into the ambiguity of an idiom: the implicit here and now of the narrative is temporally, spatially, and idiomatically a "far cry" from the place, time, and situation in life that the narrator revisits. But the narrative attends, too, to a more literal "cry" from that time which still echoes in the present. A pivotal incident is the suicide of one of the principal protagonists, Wanda Podolak – a Polish dressmaker, practitioner of radionics, and fellow tenant in Milly's house – whose "wild scream" was the last Mrs Hawkins' heard of her, and whose "last cry" before she "jumped into the dark, cold canal" was reported by witnesses.³ As

¹ Spark, "My Madeleine", in *Golden Fleece*, 73.

² Spark, *Far Cry*, 6.

³ Spark, *Far Cry*, 143-144.

Mrs Hawkins, Milly, and Wanda's sister, Greta, talk over why Wanda had taken her own life, Milly proposes searching through Wanda's personal effects:

She had taken out a drawer full of old-looking papers, letters, bills of no account dating from five years back. Obviously Wanda had been a hoarder. "What I'm looking for," said Milly, "is one of these anonymous letters. Someone *drove* Wanda to suicide."⁴

In the novel, Milly's theory is backed by Wanda's sister: "'They certainly did,' said Greta."⁵ But there is an intriguing correction to this line in the draft (which happens to be the last line on page 29): "'They certainly did,' said ~~Wanda~~Greta." (Figure 1)⁶

Had the late Wanda herself offered this confirmation that she had been driven to suicide, we would have a very different story on our hands – one of Spark's overtly supernatural tales. It is as if Wanda's ghost rears up and haunts the manuscript: having had Wanda commit suicide, Spark finds herself "resurrecting" her, and then "deletes" Wanda's partial revenant to replace her with the (intended?) Greta. It seems this slip, if that is what it is, gave Spark pause for thought, too. The next page in the notebook has been stricken through, with a single diagonal line from corner to corner (Figure 2). Then, on page 31, the narrative picks up where it left off (Figure 3).⁷ There is no explicit reference to this visitation, its exorcism, or the observed silence (so to speak), in the draft, or the published novel. But we might read the passage that follows as Spark's implicit commentary on the creative process, and as a tutelary caution to any reader of her

⁴ Spark, *Far Cry*, 158; emphasis in original.

⁵ Spark, *Far Cry*, 158.

⁶ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Manuscript Notebooks", 1983.003.1.21.5.

⁷ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Manuscript Notebooks", 1983.003.1.21.5.

manuscript, as well as Mrs Hawkins' reflection on the investigation into Wanda's personal effects. Watching Milly and Greta going through Wanda's photographs and papers, Mrs Hawkins reflects that "they were trying to reconstruct Wanda", and is reminded of a passage in *Frankenstein* in which "the scientist-narrator dabbles in the grave for materials to construct his monster." It is quoted in full: "'Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?'"⁸

Dabbling among Spark's literary remains, I was puzzling over all this in the back of my mind. How to read "~~Wanda~~Greta"? Who, or what, was in control here, and how could one know? How to read the page paradoxically marked blank – observed silence, mark of the unknowable, line in the sand? How to read these archived marks alongside the published novel? And how to respond to the analogy between Frankenstein's creation of a monster through animating lifeless materials and Spark's characters' investigations – and, by extension, those of anyone attempting to construct a narrative out of Spark's own archives? Then a voice intervened, from an unexpected source. It was a note (so it seemed) from Muriel Spark:

The blank page, the blank notebooks. I can tell you what I like and keep back what I like. You may read between the lines, there is nothing to stop you. (Figure 4)⁹

It read like a startling "message". Though obviously not personal, it is direct. And in being worded as if *apropos* a private train of thought, as a second guess as well as second-person address, it seems more personal than it is. In its form and apparent alertness to its own archival future, it rebalanced the asymmetry of the relationship between archival

⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 55; as quoted in Spark, *Far Cry*, 158.

⁹ Muriel Spark *Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Ideas for the Novel", 1983.003.1.21.9.

researcher and archival object, as if Spark had read my thoughts more effectively than I had read hers, piercing the security of the interloper's one-way, voyeuristic reading position. But in reclaiming authorship of her archive, Spark offers it as a provocative, liberating gift or dare: the secrets will remain, but make of it what you will. Later, studying the photographs I had taken in the archive, I noticed something I had missed, which added another nuance. In a folder further on in the files but which contains what appears to be early hand-written ideas for "Chapter One", and which thus most likely preceded Spark's marking of the blank page in her own draft, the same sentences appear as point "4." – underlined, crossed out, and with "STET" written, twice, beside it (Figure 5). STET notwithstanding, this message which appears to have been envisioned as the words of a character does not make it into the book itself, but comes to speak, instead, to an episode in that book's own composition. As a collection of documents, it bears some of the hallmarks of Spark's unique voice and presence, as if she had woven the thread of one of her stories into the archive: a character protests against her author's control, but the author asserts authority (as in *The Comforters*); a voice intervenes unexpectedly and unsettlingly (like the mystery caller in *Memento Mori* who telephones the elderly community with the message, "remember you must die"); an author seems to add messages into an archive of literary papers post-mortem (as in "The Executor"); and in all of this, we are reminded, rigorously and beguilingly, that the narrative in which we are absorbed is a construction. It is a drama in which the relations between autonomy and accident, author, text, and reader, the public and the private, and the power of the living and the dead to speak, are acutely at issue.

Like Wanda, Spark was a "hoarder" – "of documents and trusted friends".¹⁰ It is the first thing the writer tells us in her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), and the

¹⁰ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

scale of the main deposits of her archives attests to this. The archive of the Muriel Spark Manuscripts at the McFarlin Library, containing the literary papers for Spark's major works up to and including *A Far Cry from Kensington*, comprises 86 document boxes and extends to 42.5 linear feet.¹¹ The Muriel Spark Archive at the National Library of Scotland is even larger, occupying over 150 feet of shelf-space and constituting the "largest modern literary archive"¹² in the library's collections. Alongside the equivalent "literary" papers for Spark's subsequent (and some earlier) work, the National Library holds the vast "personal archive" of correspondence, business papers, day-diaries, photographs, and much else besides – testament to Spark's claim that "since 1949" she had "thrown away practically nothing on paper".¹³ A committed auto-archivism thus precedes and accompanies Spark as a maker of books as surely and steadfastly as her conversion to and practice of Catholicism in 1954, following her baptism into the Church of England in 1953. Yet, while there are illuminating brief accounts of the significance of Spark's archives, and while the archives have been a crucial source for some of the finest work on Spark,¹⁴ their significance in her own creative life and in terms of literary history has yet to be explored in depth.

Spark's palpable awareness of the writer's mark as future archive displayed in the encounter described above – thus the argument here – invites consideration of her archival

¹¹ ArchivesSpace Public Interface, University of Tulsa, no pagination.

¹² McIlroy, "Sparkiving", no pagination.

¹³ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185. Spark's biographer, Martin Stannard, lists seven other institutions in his bibliographical entry for the "Muriel Spark Archives", while a search on Archive-Grid yields yet more. Indeed a comprehensive search would include digging in Edinburgh's Royal Botanical Gardens, where Spark recalls that she and a childhood friend "buried a document – I think it was a jointly written story – under an ancient tree" (*Curriculum Vitae*, 69).

¹⁴ See especially Hosmer, "Muriel Spark", McIlroy, "Sparkiving", and Stannard, *Muriel Spark*.

practice as form of auto/biography. It is a performance as well as a product or process. If, in Ann Laura Stoler's terms, the "archival turn" has brought a shift in the humanities and social sciences from "archive-as-source to archive-as-subject",¹⁵ Spark's reflexive archival practice performs this dual concern, and actively challenges the archival reader to acknowledge that, as Helen Buss puts it, the archive "is not only not neutral in that society does not value all documents equally, but that it is not 'neutral' in terms of the assumptions readers bring to it."¹⁶ My reading is aligned with Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil's invitation to attend not only to the "archived 'I'" but to the "archiving 'I'", who "makes decisions about the retention and disposition of the various documents and texts that will be preserved as the archive of the self",¹⁷ and with a broad shift, particularly pronounced in recent scholarship on women writers' archives, to resist what Kate Eichhorn describes as "understanding women as potential subjects rather than as central agents of the archive",¹⁸ and to stress, as Linda M. Morra puts it in her study of Canadian women writers' archives, the ways in which authors can find "unique ways to express their autonomy by setting up and controlling their own archives in view of restrictions in part related to their gender", thus "also controlling their literary and cultural legacies."¹⁹ The provocatively, explicitly performative dimension to Spark's archive thus raises questions not only for our understanding of Spark, especially in relation to her claim in *Curriculum Vitae* that her archives stand as the "silent, objective record of truth",²⁰ but also for our understanding of the modern literary archive.

¹⁵ Stoler, *Archival Grain*, 86.

¹⁶ Buss, "Introduction", in Buss and Kadar, eds., *Working in Women's Archives*, 2.

¹⁷ Douglas and MacNeil, "Arranging the Self", 35.

¹⁸ Eichhorn, *Archival Turn*, 2.

¹⁹ Morra, *Unarrested Archives*, 12.

²⁰ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185.

Furthermore, literary estates specifically and personal archives and effects more generally are also a recurring feature in Spark's published oeuvre.²¹ Among the literary possibilities that Spark's writing expands and transforms is the literature of the (literary) archive, and Spark is eloquently attentive to the strange poetry of the posthumous that characterises encounters with "personal effects" as a component of human life – to what, in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, Spark describes as "the grief which is latent in relics" which "has no equivalent at all".²² We need to read both ways: Spark's archives illuminate the work, but the work illuminates the archive – Spark's own, and our understanding of archives more generally. Indeed, as Spark's note to the reader indicates, the dialogue between archive and published work registers the researcher's presence as we listen in. Spark anticipates, even provokes, the kind of self-scrutinising alertness to the situated experience of archival research that has increasingly come to characterise scholarship on archives. Spark thus raises questions concerning the epistemological, ethical, and methodological issues involved in researching literary remains (do we belong in literary archives?), and the cultural politics of place involved in the journeys of literary archives as contested commodities (where do these archives belong?). The cumulative argument is that these areas of inquiry – archive, published text, archival encounter – are inextricably implicated in one another.

"All and everything": Spark's Archival Practice and Auto/biography

Even without venturing into any of the Muriel Spark archives, they pose questions. The volume of Spark's archives is extraordinary, yet also exemplary of what Lorraine Daston describes as an "archival moment, simultaneously overwhelmed by the sheer amount of

²¹ See also McIlroy, "Sparkiving", and Taylor, "Out of a Book".

²² Spark, *Far Cry*, 147.

available information [...] and obsessed with its fragility”.²³ Strikingly, Spark’s self-identification as “hoarder” coincides with an intensification of clinical research into hoarding in the 1990s, resulting in DSM-5 approval in 2015.²⁴ Spark may not be a contender for *A&E’s Hoarders* or *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, but her archives, too, ask the question “at the heart of hoarding”: “the question of what it means to own something”.²⁵ And they speak powerfully to what Leena Kurvet-Käosaar has articulated as the “questions of intersubjectivity, relationality, truth, verifiability, narration, and memory” posed to life-writing by the archive.²⁶ What we gather under the name “Spark” contains the remains of many others (correspondents, authors of newspaper reviews, editors’ notes), and some of Spark’s remains are to be found in archives under other people’s names. The organisation is at points an explicitly collaborative process, involving the archivists at each institution, and most especially Penelope Jardine, whose conscientious care of Spark’s archives might almost be seen in relation to the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer.²⁷ Thus the catalogue entries alone indicate that approaching a life, and life’s work, through archives brings us up against the palpable grain of the intersubjective, relational nature of selfhood. The principal division in Spark’s case – between the “literary” and the “personal” – raises the question of which documents of a life one should include, which exclude, as part of the writer’s “literary” remains. While the distinction between a manuscript (as “literary”) and, say, a bank statement (as “personal”), is superficially obvious, Spark’s approval of the view of one

²³ Daston, *Science in the Archives*, 1.

²⁴ See Frost and Steketee, *Oxford Handbook*, 3-4.

²⁵ Frost and Steketee, *Oxford Handbook*, 3-4.

²⁶ Kurvet-Käosaar, “The Archive”, 357.

²⁷ See also, once more, Douglas and MacNeil on the “presence of other ‘I’s involved in the construction and representation of the self: ‘I’s we are here calling the ‘archiving’ and ‘archived’ ‘I’s” (“Arranging the Self”, 35).

of her characters – that all art is the “transfiguration of the commonplace”²⁸ – might give us pause. And many kinds of document, from letters and notes to newspaper cuttings and travel itineraries, are to be found in both archives. That the literary and personal overlap is never more concretely clear than in literary archives. We might think of a passage in *The Takeover*. Hubert’s secretary thinks dividing his papers between the personal and the professional ““would be the logical way”” to go about things, but, Hubert protests, “[t]here is no distinction between the two as far as I’m concerned””.²⁹

The distinction – which Spark herself maintained – is important, however. What was to become the Muriel Spark Manuscripts collection at the McFarlin Library, and the equivalent strand at the National Library of Scotland, had been distinct, and in contention as a cultural and commercial commodity, since 1963 at the latest, when a North American dealer, Lew D. Feldman, sought to acquire them. Spark refused, had her manuscripts valued, and placed them in storage in a London bank until the sales to the McFarlin Library in the 1980s.³⁰ It was at the time of these later sales to Tulsa, and especially with the publication of *Curriculum Vitae* in 1992, that the “personal archive”, which had remained with Spark across this period, came into public (or institutional) view. Its re-incorporation into Spark’s literary remains is itself an indication of the expansion of the “boundaries of the literary archive”.³¹ While auto/biographical performance comes into play across Spark’s archives (and while, as Marlene Kadar has proposed, “the fragment

²⁸ “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace” is the title of the thesis written by Sandy Stranger in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. In an interview, Spark refers to this phrase as “my definition of art – I mean that. All art – a definition – of art, is the transfiguration of the commonplace” (Naughtie, *Bookclub*, 12:10).

²⁹ Spark, *Takeover*, 9.

³⁰ See Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 288.

³¹ Stead and Smith, *Boundaries*.

and trace” can be understood as “member-genres in the taxonomy of auto/biographical practices”³²), the function of the “personal” archive is less self-evident. It is the place of Spark’s extensive auto-archivism in her creative life, and in particular the ways in which Spark treats the archive as source and subject in *Curriculum Vitae*, that is the initial focus here.

To “put the record straight”: Curriculum Vitae and the Archive

“So many strange and erroneous accounts of parts of my life have been written since I became well known” – thus Spark’s first stated motivation in writing *Curriculum Vitae* – “that I felt it time to put the record straight”. To do so, she “determined to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses; I have not relied on memory alone, vivid though it is”.³³ Spark thus opens her narrative by placing particular emphasis on what Philippe Lejeune called the “autobiographical pact”³⁴ binding author and reader to a generic expectation that an autobiography be a truthful account (“Truth by itself is neutral and has its own dear beauty”, Spark adds, and “in a work of non-fiction it is to be cherished”³⁵). And this stress on truthfulness has a particular inflection: with document and witness as foundations of that truth, as a means to both “stimulate and verify”³⁶ memory. In the closing chapter, Spark dates a decisive archival turn in her life to 1949, when she left the Poetry Society, where she had been the first female General Secretary and editor of the associated journal, *Poetry Review*, from 1947 to 1949. As Spark reports – drawing on archival evidence – an acrimonious atmosphere

³² Kadar, “The Devouring”, 223.

³³ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

³⁴ Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact”, 30.

³⁵ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

³⁶ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

developed.³⁷ Thus:

After leaving the Poetry Society I became aware of the value of documentary evidence, both as a means of personal defence against inaccuracies and as an aid to one's own memory. Consequently, since 1949 onwards I have thrown away practically nothing on paper. Almost every letter I have received, every note I have made, every cheque-book, every book of accounts, every appointments book, lists of names and addresses, my correspondence with publishers and agents throughout the world, with income tax departments, accountants, lawyers, turf accountants (I like racing when in England) – all and everything, I have conserved in a vast archive.³⁸

Evaluating the results, Spark notes that “after more than fifty years, this collection has amounted to a social history in itself”,³⁹ but it is the value of documentary evidence that she stresses as motivation:

One thing I have always known about my well-ordered archive is that it would stand by me, the silent, objective evidence of truth, should I ever need it. It has given me the confidence to proceed calmly with my creative work during all these years when not a few rash writers, “scholars” and journalists have made absurd and false statements about my life, based on the often faulty memory of one and copied in garbled form by the other. [...] I have always known that I could put the record straight wherever necessary.⁴⁰

As guarded safeguard against potential misrepresentation, the document is Janus-faced: its value is prospectively deferred as well as retrospective, and the archive of the actual is animated by, and in a sense founded on, the possible. Spark implies, too, that the archive is a means of forgetting: carrying the burden of historical fact, it liberates Spark to

³⁷ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 174-5.

³⁸ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185.

³⁹ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185.

⁴⁰ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185-186.

“proceed calmly” with her “creative work”. Archive as stimulus to memory, verification of memory, liberation from memory, repository of social history, protection against unknown futures – all are bound up in Spark’s reflections. But auto/biography is crucial, particularly if we read the slash here as a fault-line between competing accounts. Spark gives numerous examples of biographical misrepresentation, from a passing reference in a “recent biography” that presented Spark as “a flourishing hostess” at a time when she was “little known and poor” to the most persistent appropriations perpetrated by her former romantic and literary partner, Derek Stanford – his sale of her letters to him, his biographical and critical study published against Spark’s wishes in 1963 (“packed with factual errors”⁴¹), and a further memoir in 1977 in which Spark features prominently and in which, Spark protests, his memory, “unsupported by anything so trivial as evidence or documents, now flourished and ran wild”.⁴² There is a touch of Rousseau’s sensitivity to the gap that can open up between an author and the author’s public image (“There was one Rousseau in society,” Rousseau lamented, “and another who lived far away from the world and who bore no resemblance to him”).⁴³ And there is an echo of one of Spark’s most beloved writers, Cardinal Newman, whose *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* was published in defence against Charles Kingsley’s public “insult”: “he called me a *liar*”, Newman wrote, and in response “I must [...] give the true key to my whole life; I must show what I am, that it may be seen what I am not”.⁴⁴ But the explicitness of Spark’s investment in the evidentiary status of documents as “objective evidence of truth” is striking.

This has presented something of a problem-case in Spark criticism. David Goldie, for example, suggests that Spark

⁴¹ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11-12.

⁴² Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 190-1.

⁴³ Rousseau, “Ébauches”, 1151, as translated in Jefferson, *Biography*, 37.

⁴⁴ Newman, *Apologia*, 15.

renounces [...] the messiness of life as it is lived for the clear certainties of the documentary word, constituting herself as author and official keeper of her own life: a position her fiction-writing self – the witty, paradox-loving creator of Caroline Rose, Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra among many others – would surely have mocked for its impossible presumption.”⁴⁵

Similarly, Gerard Carruthers contrasts Spark’s claim in *Curriculum Vitae* that “[t]ruth by itself has its own dear beauty” with the anti-essentialist views on identity expressed in one of her autobiographical essays – “Is it conceivable that the writer of ‘The Gentile Jewesses’ believes that ‘truth’ is so readily, neutrally, and uniformly available as these words taken at face value seem to suggest?” – and points to the “Brodie-esque turn of phrase” in the claim itself, as well as what he describes as the “throwaway cataloguing rubrics such as ‘Commodities,’ ‘Neighbours,’ and even ‘The Doorbell’” that structure the first chapter, as evidence that Spark’s “habitual sense of parody is slyly in operation”.⁴⁶ Acute as these insights are, however, Spark’s dedicated auto-archivism over more than half a century cannot itself be circumnavigated as an anomaly, and the frequency with which Spark draws on her archive, and the insistence with which she protests against factual inaccuracy, make it difficult to think of her stated investment in archival evidence as either out of character or ironic in character. Indeed, within the autobiography itself, the ideal of objectivity is reformulated rather than repudiated, quite explicitly in the chapter on her early childhood. It opens as follows:

Groping for the luminous past of my first infancy I never fail to find it gleaming here and there; but never in chronological order as when I think of my later years. My childhood in Edinburgh, so far as my memory stretches back (to when I was three or four and on to my school-days) occurs in bright flashes, illuminating every detail of

⁴⁵ Goldie, “Muriel Spark”, 14-15.

⁴⁶ Carruthers, “‘Fully to savour’”, 24.

the scene. It would falsify the situation to try to connect my earliest years in a single narrative.⁴⁷

The non-chronological collage of luminous memories gravitating around the everyday talismans of early childhood which follows is thus presented, as such, in an effort not to “falsify”: self-reflexive insistence on the divergences between experience and memory, life and the telling, extends rather than undermines an ideal of objectivity. This opening paragraph is followed by a statement of a fact: “I was born on February 1, 1918, at 160 Bruntsfield Place, in the Morningside District of Edinburgh.” Then follows the first “story”: “Bread”. Do these juxtapositions relativize, or undermine, the “factual” claim? In a sense, yes: the sequence alerts us to the ways in which a statement of fact is a discourse among others, the “record” a matter of selection and arrangement. But it works both ways: the “facts” persistently punctuating the account highlight, and relativize, the artifice of narrative. Spark’s deference to documentary evidence over subjective memory recalls Virginia Woolf’s reflection that the biographer, unlike the novelist, is tied to the “granite-like truth” – but she is attentive, too, to the “rainbow-like personality” of the subject.⁴⁸ Spark – a biographer as well as a poet before she was a writer of fiction – is concerned with both these dimensions in writing lives.

Spark’s claims for truth are not limited to *Curriculum Vitae*, or her biographical work. A preoccupation with objective truth, and a highly calibrated sense of truth, recurs in some of Spark’s most fundamental statements of her way of seeing. In an interview with Frank Kermode conducted in 1963, for example, Spark remarked that “I am interested in truth – absolute truth – and I don’t pretend that what I’m writing is more

⁴⁷ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 17.

⁴⁸ Woolf, “The New Biography”, 100.

than an imaginative extension of the truth – something inventive”.⁴⁹ Spark thus conceives of her fictional enterprise as founded on and licensed by an explicit fictionality in which certain kinds of truth (literal, factual, absolute) are affirmed by being transgressed. Many of Spark’s essays and autobiographical pieces chime with this. But “What Images Return” is especially resonant. A reflection on place and identity, home and exile, reality and perception, it is first and last an elegy to Spark’s father, expressed through the “nevertheless” idea:

In fact, I approve of the ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement “nevertheless, it’s raining”. I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.⁵⁰

The “nevertheless principle” can be interpreted as Spark’s statement of a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” credo. As Joseph Hynes writes, “what she means by this phrase is, in short, that any position taken or point made has another side”.⁵¹ Yet this reading, which locates a prevalent theoretical ethos in Spark’s thought, requires we reject the bathetic comedy of the scenario: it is not that it is “both” raining “and” not raining depending on our point of view, but that our calculations and predictions are belied by the actual. Spark sets up a number of parallel dichotomies, with the probable and perhaps preferable – the easier – on the one hand, and a “statement of unmitigated fact preceded by ‘nevertheless’” on the other. The forecast points to fine weather; nevertheless, it is raining. Edinburgh is composed of the “formal grace” of the New Town and the “noble network” of the Old; nevertheless, a Castle on a primitive rock juts into the skyline.

⁴⁹ Kermode, “House of Fiction”, 30.

⁵⁰ Spark, “What Images Return”, in *Golden Fleece*, 64.

⁵¹ Hynes, *Art of the Real*, 2.

Implicitly: Catholic faith, for an individual with part-Jewish background, or given the “only problem” of evil, seems unlikely; nevertheless, “I turned Catholic”. These dichotomies move towards the “unmitigated fact” on which the essay hinges. Having received the call to inform her that her father is dead, Spark recalls looking out of the hotel window and noticing that the Castle was there, “as if I had expected otherwise”.⁵² Perhaps the weather is fine; perhaps the Castle is not there; perhaps my father is alive. Nevertheless... We sacrifice much of Spark’s satirical and elegiac power if we evacuate objective reality from the equation here, or doubt Spark’s resolute insistence on the “unmitigated fact”. Amid probable, perhaps preferable auto/biographical accounts, each document in Spark’s archive is underwritten by the “nevertheless” principle.

Spark exercises scrupulous scepticism towards her own perception and memory as much as those of others: her rememorative approach is in this sense less a bid for Brodie-esque control than a renunciation of it. Spark had acute personal cause for this scepticism. In an appeal against the decision of the National Insurance Officer to disallow Spark’s benefits for the period 20th January – 3rd April 1954, Spark wrote that the reason she had “failed to claim within the prescribed period” was “a mental breakdown, the nature of which prevented me from grasping a great many objective facts”:

the trouble was that I began to imagine secret codes in everything I read, even in the press, and so lost a grip on reality. I assure you that if anyone had mentioned National Insurance to me during this time I would have thought it signified something different from what it is.⁵³

Spark’s investment in documentary evidence involves wariness of the subjective, and an exercise of faith in a reality beyond it. Indeed, Spark attributes to the archive a strikingly

⁵² Spark, “What Images Return”, in *Golden Fleece*, 64-5.

⁵³ National Library of Scotland, *Muriel Spark Archive*, 10607:8.

similar role to that ascribed by critics (and sometimes by Spark herself) to her Catholicism: both archive and God represent a reality beyond human consciousness (for Spark the “main point” of the Book of Job is that “where human reason cannot reconcile the fact of evil with the goodness of God, an anthropomorphic conception of God breaks down”⁵⁴). Yet the prospect of an equivalency between theological and archival authority points towards another problem: believing that “truth has its own dear beauty” is not the same thing as believing a document to be guarantor of this truth. Documents may be palpably present, empirically verifiable, but, as Spark’s fictions so often remind us, signatures and documents can be forged, handwriting can be misread or misattributed, evidence can be faked, and the pieces of the puzzle can be rearranged to make very different pictures. In a sense, the very idea that Spark foregrounds in her autobiography – that the “record” can be put “straight” – presupposes that the document (and the witness) can be unreliable.

On one level, this is a question of distinguishing between the authentic and the fake. More subtly, it requires vigilance regarding the ways in which “evidence becomes auto/biographical knowledge through the life-writer’s or researcher’s acts of positioning, contextualizing, interpreting, and translating”.⁵⁵ Indeed, as soon as we see a document (or anything else) as evidence we change its ontological status. It is intrinsic in the very grammar of the word that “evidence” is dependent on narrative, interpretation, context: pointing beyond itself via a preposition, evidence is always “of” something other than itself, always concerned with absence as well as presence. Spark’s archives are full of these absences, and in being transformed into narrative something else again is made – like the reconstruction of Wanda from her effects. In fact, Spark reminds us of this

⁵⁴ Spark, “The Mystery of Job’s Suffering”, in *Golden Fleece*, 196.

⁵⁵ Kurvet-Käosaar, “The Archive”, 356.

throughout *Curriculum Vitae*, from the title on: it is a selective course through a life, not a life. The radical selectivity at work could hardly be more clearly evidenced than in the contrast in scale between the slim volume that is *Curriculum Vitae* and the compendious archive that underwrites it. Something of the page marked blank in the draft of *A Far Cry from Kensington* thus finds its way into Spark's auto/biographical form.

The "Muriel Spark Manuscripts"

By the time Spark "commenced author"⁵⁶ there were cultural scripts for accounting for the value of what was to become the "Muriel Spark Manuscripts" at the McFarlin Library, and the equivalent strand of the archives at the National Library of Scotland. The tradition – and business – of modern and contemporary writers' manuscripts was an established, if contested, dimension of literary culture, particularly in the United States. For well established authors, the literary archive has increasingly become a cultural object, and potentially a commercial product: living authors can sell (or gift) the verso along with the recto, book by book if so desired. By a striking coincidence, 1963, the year in which Spark was approached by Lew D. Feldman in pursuit of her letters and manuscripts, was also a significant moment in the cultural history of literary archives. Following a campaign led by Philip Larkin in the 1950s, the National Manuscripts Collection of Contemporary Poets was founded for the preservation of living poets' manuscripts, in part in a bid to stem the tide of literary archives travelling across the Atlantic to the U.S.A.⁵⁷ Indeed, Spark's writing life coincides with a literary historical period in which the physical literary archive is strongly at issue, from the intensification of acquisitions

⁵⁶ Spark, "The Writing Life", in *Golden Fleece*, 77.

⁵⁷ See Taylor, "What Will Survive of Us is Manuscripts", and Larkin, "A Neglected Responsibility".

at the mid-century through to the early twenty-first century, by which point word processing and born-digital documents were beginning to replace autograph drafts and annotated type-written documents as the predominant technologies of writing. Spark's awareness of this archival context plays out pervasively within her literary archive itself.

The "blank page" documents are among many indications of Spark's sense of the archival future of the marks of her creative practice. There is a note among the papers for *The Mandelbaum Gate*, published in 1965 and on which Spark was working when approached by Feldman, which reads: "*When completed book SELL selected letters + all finished literary manuscripts*".⁵⁸ That Spark intended to sell her "selected letters + all finished literary manuscripts" at this point is significant. Equally so is Spark's inclusion of this note within the archive of her selected letters and manuscripts itself – her apprehension of a record of her awareness of the commercial value of her manuscripts as an intrinsic component of her creative process. There are also what seem to be marks of retrospective auto-curatorial practice. Among the papers for the same novel, for example, there is a note that appears to have been added in later, in ink of a different colour to the rest of the writing, in the top left-hand corner of the page: "*Book started here Jan 1961*".⁵⁹ And in another folder relating to *The Mandelbaum Gate* – a novel Spark worked on while observing the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem – there is a note that might almost be read as graphic art:

~~*Why can't we wipe out the past?*~~

The past can be wiped out.

We can return to an earlier period of Time before the Past began.

⁵⁸ Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: *The Mandelbaum Gate*, "Character Lists, Plot Notes", 1983.003.1.39.6.

⁵⁹ Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: *The Mandelbaum Gate*, "Character Lists, Plot Notes", 1983.003.1.39.6.

*The Past will then be the Future, and we can choose for ourselves which experience to keep and which to reject. (Figure 6)*⁶⁰

Such documents indicate the powerful resonance between a self-conscious archiving and Spark's thinking on history and narrative. But the transformation of the marks of her own thought into archival object under other eyes is often distinctly present, too, particularly in the files relating to Spark's work during the period in which she was most intensively negotiating the sale of her manuscripts. As with the note asserting that "I can tell you what I like and keep back what I like", self-consciousness often shades into observer address, as in this note, also from the *Far Cry* folders, which seems to intone in two directions, half elegiac reflection, half admonition:

The most interesting documents come from the innocent period. Self-conscious awareness of biographical hunters have [*sic*] killed the spontaneity of the person. the man. the woman.⁶¹

This loss of "innocence" is an emblematic statement in terms of literary period as well as in personal terms. The acuteness of Spark's reflection lies, in part, in the implication that auto/biographical self- and observer-conscious performance may come into play in a writer's archive not only at the point of collecting, culling, re-arranging, editing, inserting, fabricating, forging (etc.) the documents, but in the very practice, even the idea, of making marks at all. To write with "self-conscious awareness of biographical hunters" (and, we might add, any other reader of archives) is to write with a sense of a stranger on the shoulder, closer to a sense of surveillance than of audience. This puts not only privacy

⁶⁰ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: The Mandelbaum Gate*, "Character Lists, Plot Notes", 1983.003.1.39.5.

⁶¹ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Ideas for the Novel", 1983.003.1.21.9.

but also, more specifically, the provisional under pressure. One of the effects of the valorisation of the literary manuscript is that it introduces a paradox at the heart of the idea of the ephemeral: precisely the ephemeron is prized for its permanent value. The unique marks and effects of the writer, by contrast to the mass-produced book, take on the kind of “aura” that Walter Benjamin argued had “withered in the age of mechanical reproduction”,⁶² sharing with the un-reproducible artwork the quality of “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.⁶³ For the writer with this in mind, the act of writing is haunted by its own posterity: the idea of the draft as “remains” is absorbed into the life of making marks itself. Spark’s explicit self-consciousness in her archive thus points towards the ways in which a historically specific culture of preservation can influence the culture of creativity it seeks to preserve, infiltrating the modus operandi of literary creativity itself.⁶⁴ Spark traces the impersonal shadow of the collector – or archivist, biographer, critic – into the collectible manuscript before the collector ever touches it. Thus the paradox of preservation: what we preserve, and what we wish to preserve, turns into something else.

In Spark’s terms, such a re-birth involves a kind of murder. Yet Spark was herself fascinated by writers’ manuscripts and relics, and was responsive to what Larkin called the “magical value” as well as the “meaningful value” of manuscripts – the value he described as “the older and more universal: this is the paper he wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous

⁶² Benjamin, “The Work”, 215.

⁶³ Benjamin, “The Work”, 214.

⁶⁴ It thus self-consciously performs what Derrida writes of the archive: “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.” (Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17)

combination”.⁶⁵ Spark had “a bundle of Newman’s original letters” with her “all the time” she was working on a selection of the Cardinal’s letters: “I found it good to touch the very papers that the sublime Father Newman had touched.”⁶⁶ And in her biographical and critical writing she often acts on the view she expresses in her work on the Brontës, that “where outstanding figures of literature are concerned, surely the greatest benefit to be derived from a study of their lives is that which penetrates the operation of the creative mind, interpreting the spirit which motivated it”.⁶⁷ It is a fascination – an attraction as well as an anxiety – that plays out across her *oeuvre*.

The ‘grief which is latent in relics’: The literature of the archive

Spark’s favoured answer to the question of “what it was that made me get down to writing in the first place”⁶⁸ is conveyed in a four-times-told tale. A woman finds herself, by chance and unwittingly at first, in the house of a famous poet while he was away. Realising it is the poet’s house, she touches the books, smells the pencils, as if, as Spark writes in one version, “by some sympathetic magic I could draw from the poet’s possessions some essence which would enable me to get down to my writing”.⁶⁹ In its first incarnation, it is a supernaturally charged short story, “The House of the Famous Poet” (1952). It is then re-visited as a broadcast, “The Poet’s House” (1960), a kind of coda to the story in which Spark reveals the autobiographical encounter behind it: it was the house of Louis MacNeice. Spark then published this radio piece in print, with an additional “Comment on ‘The Poet’s House’” in 1968. And finally published a “Footnote

⁶⁵ Larkin, “Neglected Responsibility”, 99.

⁶⁶ Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 202.

⁶⁷ Spark, *Essence of the Brontës*, 27. See also *Child of Light*, 27.

⁶⁸ Spark, “The Poet’s House”, *Golden Fleece*, 67.

⁶⁹ Spark, “The Poet’s House”, *Golden Fleece*, 69.

to ‘The Poet’s House’”, appositely enough in *Architectural Digest*, in 1985.

The reformulations of this story illustrate the perennial importance of archives and personal effects for Spark, and the distinctiveness of her response. The extent of Spark’s engagement with literary estates invites comparison with Henry James, and there is often something of *The Aspern Papers* and James’s tales of the literary life in Spark’s dramatization of the anxiety of the writer as museum-piece and the potential fetishism and parasitism of the biographical critic, in her stories especially.⁷⁰ There is something of the scepticism and playfulness of Nabokov in *Pale Fire* in her formally inventive games in which authorship is at issue, and something of Byatt’s historical satire in *Possession*, too.⁷¹ But Spark stands inside the attraction as well as outside it, placing it at the heart of her own creative imagination, and she is drawn recurrently to different kinds of “archive” – estates, the boxed-up detritus of characters’ lives, caches of letters – and to the pathos of “the world of past trivialities and passions forever pending” that come “rising up to Hubert from the open boxes” of his old letters in *The Takeover*.⁷² And some of Spark’s most characteristic formal innovations, such as her foregrounding of the literary text as script, her flash-forwards and flash-backs, her deployment of the historic present, resonate powerfully with the figure of the archive.

While archives are a recurrent, even pervasive, presence in Spark, the period from the late 1970s through to the publication of *Curriculum Vitae* is of special interest. This

⁷⁰ See e.g. “The House of the Famous Poet” (1952), “Harper and Wilton” (1953), “The Father’s Daughters” (1959), “The Executor” (1983), “The Dragon” (1985), and “Open to the Public” (1989), collected in Spark, *Complete Short Stories*.

⁷¹ For a rich study of contemporary British fiction (though not the work of Spark) in which archival quests figure prominently, and an exploration of their relation to post-Second World War history and heritage, and the decline of empire, see Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001).

⁷² Spark, *Takeover*, 9.

is the period of an “autobiographical turn” in Spark’s writing,⁷³ and not coincidentally the period in which Spark sells her archives. It is a period in which Spark is consistently concerned with the literary life, estates and archives, and in which – redolent, again, of James, in his “late” phase, the years of the New York Edition and the autobiographies – she delights in a “palpable imaginable *visitable* past”.⁷⁴ She “collects” her work to date, publishing her collected poems as *Going Up to Sotheby’s* in 1982 (inviting us to read her poetry under the sign of the commercial manuscript in her choice of title poem) and *The Stories of Muriel Spark* in 1985. She revises her first book, her biography of Mary Shelley, as *Child of Light* (1987). Her stories of the period include “The Executor” (1983), in which a writer’s niece and executor offers up the “total archive” of his “literary remains” for sale but holds back one unfinished manuscript, planning to finish it herself, only to find a different note from her uncle each day, chastising her for her deception,⁷⁵ and “Open to the Public” (1989), a sequel to an earlier story (“The Father’s Daughters” (1952)), in which a writer’s executors plan to make a museum of his house, but ultimately decide to burn the archive.⁷⁶ And her novels all engage powerfully with archives. The most recent at the point of Spark’s first sale, *Loitering with Intent* (1981), has a plot in which a stolen manuscript and its retrieval are central, and in which an Autobiographical Association stores up its members’ autobiographies for the purposes of blackmail. Just as that novel’s narrator Fleur Talbot is writing a novel (*Warrender Chase*) that had been an unused title from Spark’s early writing life,⁷⁷ so Spark’s protagonist in *The Only Problem*

⁷³ See especially Goldie (2010) and Sawada (2011), as well as Spark’s own account of the relation between these novel’s and her own life as a writer in Chapter Seven of *Curriculum Vitae*.

⁷⁴ James, *The Aspern Papers*, xxxi; emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Spark, “The Executor”, 255 and passim.

⁷⁶ Spark, “Open to the Public”, 220.

⁷⁷ See Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 444.

(1984) is writing a book Spark had planned, but not written, early in her career, on the Book of Job⁷⁸ (an early version of this novel, too, was begun in the first-person).⁷⁹ And *A Far Cry from Kensington*, the last book published before the final sale to Tulsa, is perhaps Spark's most profound meditation on all that is at stake in archives, and the relationships among archives, auto/biography, and fiction.

The plot of the novel revolves around manuscripts, documents, and personal effects. Mrs Hawkins is a literary editor in publishing, engaged in the raw materials that constitute the literary archive. Her first employer in the novel, Martin York, is convicted on "eight charges of uttering forged banker's documents and intent to defraud".⁸⁰ And York's fraud, seen as unwise and weak rather than malevolent (seven years imprisonment seems to Mrs Hawkins a "stiff sentence term even for those days"⁸¹), is set off against the more pernicious forgeries central to the plot. Hector Bartlett, in revenge against Mrs Hawkins for calling him a "*pisseur de copie*" – he "vomited literary matter," she explains at one point, "he urinated and sweated, he excreted it"⁸² – manipulates Wanda into attempting to use radionics, a "pseudo-scientific practice" which "claimed to diagnose and cure at any distance disorders and ailments in people, animals and vegetables",⁸³ to harm rather than heal Mrs Hawkins. (The radionics "Box" for this is itself a kind of occult archive, with "a place for inserting a piece of hair or a blood-smear" which "was supposed

⁷⁸ Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 139.

⁷⁹ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: The Only Problem*, "The Finishing Touch", 1983.003.1.56.7.

⁸⁰ Spark, *Far Cry*, 52. Spark's research draws substantially on the trial and conviction of the MP and publisher at Falcon Press, Peter Baker (*Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Research Material", 1983.003.1.19.7).

⁸¹ Spark, *Far Cry*, 52.

⁸² Spark, *Far Cry*, 46.

⁸³ Spark, *Far Cry*, 152.

to cure the ailments of those for whom the blood or the hair had been taken”.⁸⁴) Bartlett coerces Wanda by forging anonymous letters from “The Organisers” threatening to expose her as a tax evader,⁸⁵ and then a news article – “Polish Dressmaker Under Investigation” – which precipitates Wanda’s suicide.⁸⁶ Forged documents lead to prison, death; and it is through literacy in reading personal archives and effects, sorting the authentic from the fake, that the story is unravelled.⁸⁷

Yet the archive of Wanda’s personal effects is also among the most striking embodiments of Mrs Hawkins’ realization of “how very little I knew about Wanda, far less her mind”⁸⁸:

The sadness of these last gatherings of personal effects, the siftings and sortings and parceling-up, is more inexpressible than the funeral, where at least there is a fixed rite, there are words, the coffin has a shape and the grave a certain depth, and even the sorrow of the mourners has some silent eloquence if only conveyed and formally interpreted by their standing still. But the grief which is latent in relics like Wanda’s pair of worn shoes has no equivalent at all.⁸⁹

This points to the more pervasive ways in which the archive figures in the novel: in its preoccupation with sound and silence, presence and absence, the limits of witness and the reality of that which leaves no trace. In the opening paragraph, Mrs Hawkins recalls that she would “lie awake at night listening to the silence” and offers her first piece of direct advice to the reader: “You can sit peacefully in front of a blank television set, just watching nothing; and sooner or later you can make your own programme much better

⁸⁴ Spark, *Far Cry*, 77

⁸⁵ Spark, *Far Cry*, 29.

⁸⁶ Spark, *Far Cry*, 167.

⁸⁷ See e.g. Mrs Hawkins’ identification of forged signatures (*Far Cry*, 33), faked letters (42), and social background through graphology (43).

⁸⁸ Spark, *Far Cry*, 144.

⁸⁹ Spark, *Far Cry*, 146.

than the mass product. It's fun, you should try it."⁹⁰ The television, receiver of sights and sounds from afar, is blank. Yet there are pictures and sounds in the mind that leave no mark. The second-person address (used more frequently in this novel than elsewhere) unsettles slightly the mood of reverie, involving the reader, making it harder to feel we are overhearing what we read (thus akin to Spark's archival gestures). The central theme of suicide is first presented in terms of its challenge to witness and documentation, as "something we know too little about, simply because the chief witness has died, frequently with his secret that no suicide-note seems adequate to square with the proportions of the event".⁹¹ Questions of the oral and the written are embedded in the language: the church happens to be Brompton Oratory; forged documents are "uttered"; the last we hear of the "*pisseur de copie*" is his "short staccato laugh like a type-writer".⁹² In contrast to this expressive incontinence, Mrs Hawkins has the "habit to silently recite the Angelus at twelve noon",⁹³ yet the "crime" for which Bartlett seeks revenge is her calling him a "*pisseur*" to his face. What should be "published", what kept silent? What does the palpable trace omit, occlude, or obliterate?

Spark herself suggests of her time working at Falcon Press in the early 1950s that "much of this environment went into my novel, *A Far Cry from Kensington*".⁹⁴ And *A Far Cry* has been received as a roman-a-clef in which Mrs Hawkins represents Spark herself; Bartlett her former partner, Stanford; Milly, the landlady, Spark's own landlady of the period, Tiny Lazzari, and so on. But this only takes us so far. For one, features of Spark's biography are distributed among several characters. It is Emma Loy, not Mrs

⁹⁰ Spark, *Far Cry*, 5.

⁹¹ Spark, *Far Cry*, 43.

⁹² Spark, *Far Cry*, 189.

⁹³ Spark, *Far Cry*, 51.

⁹⁴ Spark, *Far Cry*, 197.

Hawkins, who is caught up in a relationship with Bartlett, and “with her egocentricity, her capriciousness, and her magic and her charm”, she is a writer whose presence and sayings echo those of Spark. What Mrs Hawkins says of Loy – “that way of composing a book like a piece of music, that Loy style of ferretting out facts and juxtaposing them with inventions”⁹⁵ – could equally be said of Spark. Nor does Mrs Hawkins portray herself explicitly as a writer (though her happy-ever-after with one William Todd, who dances with her in a moonlit garden, she in her black dress, might stand as an allegory of the writer’s calling).⁹⁶ But more importantly, if we see the book’s engagement with auto/biography too literally, and particularly if we seek to understand the coruscation of Bartlett’s character with reference to what we know of Spark’s biography, we put ourselves in the position of Loy who, feeling responsible for Bartlett’s career, appeals for charitable treatment of his work and reputation from Mrs Hawkins, asking her to see it from the “human point of view”.⁹⁷ For Mrs Hawkins, one of the “prime duties of the job”⁹⁸ is to discriminate between the talent of Loy and the lack of it in Bartlett. We do a disservice to Spark’s art if we appeal to the “human point of view”, to Spark’s sense of betrayal, in evaluating the book. Indeed, part of the book’s power lies precisely in its transfiguration of this experience into something else. Bartlett’s behaviour, Mrs Hawkins observes, “wouldn’t have mattered”, but for the question, “What chance, what protection against herself, had Wanda?”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Spark, *Far Cry*, 98.

⁹⁶ Spark, *Far Cry*, 63-4.

⁹⁷ Spark, *Far Cry*, 135.

⁹⁸ Spark, *Far Cry*, 150.

⁹⁹ Spark, *Far Cry*, 166. My reading here offers an alternative response to that of Will Boyd in his recent introduction to the novel, in claiming that “If one didn’t know why – didn’t know the backstory – then Bartlett’s portrait would seem almost shrill and over-vindictive” (Boyd, “Introduction”, xiv).

The manuscripts give a sense of how Spark incrementally de-personalized the narrative and brought Wanda into the foreground. For much of the composition, the “far cry” was from Pimlico (where Spark herself lived) rather than Kensington. Trial titles include “*A Far Cry from Pimlico*” and even “*A Far Cry to Pimlico*”.¹⁰⁰ Spark has the idea at one point in her notes: “*Pisseur* puts her [Wanda] under pressure. How?”¹⁰¹ And in an intriguingly dialogical, even interrogative, mode not uncommon in Spark’s notes, she writes:

Q: Why is Wanda operating the Box if she thinks it is evil?

A: She is being [...] constrained to do it.

Q: Why and by whom?

A: The *pisseur*, but why?¹⁰²

Spark gradually works out an answer to this final question in the plot (which thus emerges from rather than determines composition, tone, musical phrase) and arrives at what becomes the structure for the mystery:

Notes for novel throughout

Timing MAKE CLEAR

Hector Bartlett gets to know Wanda through Isobel

He wants Wanda to work the Box

To that end he blackmails her about the tax

He sleeps with her

Mrs Hawkins insults him

Hector ‘persuades’ Wanda to work the Box against Mrs Hawkins

Mrs Hawkins ‘wastes away’

¹⁰⁰ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, “Notes and Draft Fragments”, 1983.003.1.20.2.

¹⁰¹ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, “Notes and Draft Fragments”, 1983.003.1.20: 1.

¹⁰² *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, “Notes and Draft Fragments”, 1983.003.1.20: 3.

Wanda's suicide¹⁰³

And here is the 'End' as Spark envisaged it at one point: "My advice to anyone with a long past is to not forget the past, remember the details if you can with affection. However bad it was, the past needs your affection. It is a far cry from Kensington. A far cry." But literally between the lines, rather as ~~Wan~~ asserts her presence in the autograph draft, is the recollection that calls for a hearing alongside this sentiment: "and Wanda howling in her room".¹⁰⁴

By the final version, Wanda's cry is implicit in the last word. Mrs Hawkins remembers that when planning her wedding she had "thought how Wanda could make my dress, until I remembered she was dead".¹⁰⁵ This opens the last chapter, bringing us to thirty years later in Italy, and Mrs Hawkins' last encounter with Bartlett, while paying a bill in a restaurant:

"*Pisseur de copie*," I hissed.

He walked backwards so that people behind him had to make way for him, still with his short staccato laugh like a typewriter.

William was waiting for me at the car.

"Did you settle the bill?" he said.

I said, "Yes."

It was a far cry from Kensington, a far cry.¹⁰⁶

Wanda's suicide is the "unmitigated fact" in the fictional world of *A Far Cry from Kensington* – a fact which opens inquiries into the limits of what we can know of one

¹⁰³ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Notes and Draft Fragments", "Research Material", 1983.003.1.19.7.

¹⁰⁴ *Muriel Spark Papers, Tulsa: A Far Cry from Kensington*, "Notes and Draft Fragments", "Notes and Draft Fragments", 1983.003.1.20: 1.

¹⁰⁵ Spark, *Far Cry*, 188.

¹⁰⁶ Spark, *Far Cry*, 189.

another. In the equivalence between “settling the bill” and the polyvalent meanings of the “far cry” – in which speaking and listening, then and now, here and there, are inextricably bound up – the novel’s ethic fuses an apprehension of the actual with an equally powerful sense that no record is complete, no trace limitable to a single meaning.

Conclusion: Personal effects

This essay began with an archival encounter that Spark anticipated and addressed within her archive and her work. In treating her archive as both record and performance, and incorporating these concerns into the fibre of her writing, Spark writes with a palpable consciousness of the journeys her marks will make: the “far cry” is committed to paper with a keen sense of its geographical as well as temporal future. This prefigures and complicates the increasingly self-reflexive character of archival research. What Alice Yaeger wrote in “Working in the Archives” (1990) – that “the archive runs on a passion that is anything but public and which is rarely talked about”¹⁰⁷ – is no longer the case. Much work responds to what Arlette Farge calls *The Allure of the Archives* (1989) and there is now almost a sub-genre of critical study in which the archival experience is foregrounded.¹⁰⁸ In her auto/biographical and fictional engagement with the “unmitigated fact” fused with an acute sense of the fragility, ambiguity, and pathos of the archival trace, Spark speaks to the strange fusion of objective “findings” with subjective embodiment involved in working in archives. More challengingly, she shows that subjective involvement is inter-subjective: self-reflexivity involves engaging with the outline of our own reflection within the object itself.

¹⁰⁷ Yaeger, “Working in the Archive”, 103.

¹⁰⁸ See e.g. Ted Bishop’s *Riding with Rilke*, and Christopher de Hamel’s *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*.

The ‘specialness’ of materials consulted in special collections is tied to their uniqueness, to their rootedness in their own specificity. But literary remains rarely remain in one place. As *lieux de memoire*¹⁰⁹ they are often displaced places of memory, eminently “portable monuments”.¹¹⁰ The cultural politics of these archival journeys are often only tangentially addressed, and direct commentary tends to echo Philip Larkin’s sense, in calling on British librarians and universities to prevent manuscripts being bought up in the U.S.A., that “the best place for a writer’s papers is in one of the libraries of his own country”.¹¹¹ This was a feature of the campaign, led by Ian Rankin, to raise the money for Muriel Spark’s archive to be bought by the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh: “her treasure trove of an archive should have its home in Edinburgh, the city of her birth and the setting for her most famous work.”¹¹² Yet Spark, who described herself as “Scottish by formation” but a “constitutional exile”,¹¹³ lived in Scotland, England, Rhodesia (as was), South Africa, the U.S.A., and Italy. Her most settled “home”, and her last, was in Tuscany.¹¹⁴ If money were no object, what has the stronger claim on Spark’s – or any other writer’s – remains? Place of birth? Place of death? Adopted home? The place or places of creation, or of the works’ imagined worlds? The place, institutional or geographical, where its archival context creates the most provocative possibilities? Our inclinations involve a response to knotty questions about the relationship between a writer’s life and work, and more mysteriously still, between the writer’s mark and place.

¹⁰⁹ See Nora and Kritzman, *Realms of Memory*.

¹¹⁰ See Rigney, *Afterlives*.

¹¹¹ See e.g. Motion: “Nothing against America or its libraries”, Motion remarks, “I just think there’s a value – academic, philosophical, emotional – in keeping things close to their point of origin.” (Motion, “Magic of Manuscripts”, no pagination).

¹¹² Rankin, n. pag.

¹¹³ Spark, “What Images Return”, *Golden Fleece*, 64.

¹¹⁴ See Carruthers, “Fully to Savour”, and Taylor, “Out of a Book”.

It is an irony that these debates should emerge so vigorously in the very period of literature in which the relationship between writer and nation has been most pervasively brought into question. The division of Spark's main archives between Tulsa (a city she had never visited) and Edinburgh, in itself speaks powerfully to this context, pitched between commercial and cultural codes of value.

Once enacted, these displacements become part of the archive's meaning. The Spark Archives enter and alter the larger archival logics pertaining at each of their sites. At the National Library of Scotland, Spark's archive is connected with "individual historical documents and literary manuscripts of national importance",¹¹⁵ though as emphasised in the exhibition in celebration of Spark's centenary, *The International Style of Muriel Spark*, this does not mean national importance alone. At Tulsa, Spark's archive is placed alongside those of Joyce, Naipaul, Rhys in a collection in which literary importance is the governing criterion and the connection to Tulsa, Oklahoma or the U.S.A. has no stated bearing, and alongside collections "in the areas of US history, western American history, Oklahoma history, petroleum industry history, Native American history, and military history".¹¹⁶ How do these contexts constellate with

¹¹⁵ See The National Library of Scotland, Manuscripts and Archives: <https://www.nls.uk/collections/manuscripts/archives>.

¹¹⁶ See The University of Tulsa, Special Collections, "About the Department": <https://utulsa.libguides.com/c.php?g=831862&p=5938880>.

Spark's archives? Even anticipating travelling to Tulsa, I found myself, sometimes whimsically, looking for resonances between Spark's archive and its site, including those "areas of US history" associated with the city, and more pragmatically, where it would be possible, given time, to study the Jean Rhys Papers. One of Spark's gifts is in offering a language for these encounters. When working at a blindly frenetic pace on my last few days through the Jean Rhys Papers and being stopped in my tracks by a folder containing simply Rhys's empty purse, or when encountering the exhibits of Native American art and culture in the Philbrook and Gilcrease Museums, with children's shoes among the personal effects transformed into exhibits, Spark's work offered an anatomy of the misreadings and appropriations that might come into play, and the beginning of a response in acknowledging that "[t]he grief which is latent in relics [...] has no equivalent at all". Where that leaves Spark's own blanked out page, photographed through a University of Tulsa-inscribed acetate sheet, and how to read it here and there, then and now, remains an open question.

It was a far cry from Tulsa, a far cry.

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Figures

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