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Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.3366/mod.2021.0349

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published in:
Modernist Cultures

Publisher Rights Statement:
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A ‘world of method and intrigue’: Muriel Spark’s Literary Intelligence

Simon Cooke

On 7 July, 1960, Muriel Spark broadcast a talk commissioned by the BBC – ‘The Poet’s House’ – about how she became a writer, and in particular about what made her ‘get down to writing in the first place, and actually put pen to paper’. It was, she explained, ‘a curious adventure in the summer of 1944’. Earlier that year, Spark had ‘managed to get a passage home’ from Central Africa, and ‘like everyone else […] was immediately sent to a war job. It was with the Foreign Office in the country and whenever I got leave to come up to London I made straight for the bookshops’.¹ The ‘war job’, as Spark was to describe it in her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), was that of Duty Secretary in the Newsroom of MI6’s department of Political Intelligence – the public name for the clandestine Political Warfare Executive (PWE) – based at Milton Bryan, tasked with broadcasting ‘black propaganda’: ‘news presented in such a way that the Germans got the impression that they were listening to a German station’ as ‘a camouflage for subtle and deadly anti-Nazi propaganda. Detailed truth with believable lies […].’² But Spark does not go into detail on this war job in ‘The Poet’s House’, and instead makes for the story of how, returning from Edinburgh by train one day, she missed the last connection back to the country, and was invited by ‘a girl’ she had met on the train to ‘spend the night with her at St John’s Wood’ in a house where the ‘master and mistress’ were away. At the house, Spark observes the papers, the ink-pot, the ‘enterprising sort of library’ – perhaps not that of an ‘elderly cranky professor’ as she had initially thought? – and takes down some of the titles, finding some of them signed by the authors, and one of them ‘dedicated […] to a famous poet’.³ The friend confirms that this is indeed, as Spark asks, ‘the house of the famous poet’, and the incident has ‘an intense imaginative effect’. She ‘went round touching everything’, ‘sat at the poet’s desk’, ‘lifted the pencils and smelt them’, ‘was intent on touching the books’, as if by ‘some sympathetic magic’ she could ‘draw from the poet’s possessions some essence which would enable me to get down to my writing’. It brings Spark to a decisive moment:

At this particular moment my life could have taken several courses. Everyone was thinking of what they were going to do after the war. A number of lively prospects involving whole new ways of life were opening up before me at that moment. But suddenly in the poet’s house they all seemed unattractive beside the possibility of becoming a writer. One never knows if any particular decision is a right or a wrong one. But whatever its value, I came to this determination, and I was filled with a feeling of freedom and complete dedication which has never left me. And so this poet’s house in which I found myself by chance became for me a symbol of what I was to attempt to make of my life.  

Before leaving ‘for the country’, Spark made a telephone call to a literary agent to enquire if they would like her ‘new book’ (though at this point she has not written a book), adding that she was ‘speaking from the house of the poet, whose name I did not hesitate to mention’. The literary agent agrees to take her on. That evening, ‘back in the country’, Spark writes a poem under this new sense of freedom and determination, and though she deems it ‘a terrible poem’, submits it to two journals, both of whom accept it, leaving her with a ‘most encouraging dilemma’ and a conviction: ‘[…] I felt I was really set up in my literary career.’  

Spark often revisited this resonant episode. Its first incarnation was as a supernatural short story, ‘The House of the Famous Poet’, published in 1952. At the same time as she revised this fiction for re-publication in The New Yorker, in 1968, Spark prepared the factual talk of 1960 for publication in Encounter magazine, adding an additional ‘Comment on “The Poet’s House”’ (revealing that Louis MacNeice was the famous poet). Until at least the mid-1960s, Spark had played with ideas for an anthology, which never came to print, ‘entitled provisionally THE POET’S HOUSE’, bringing together ‘stories, poems, and occasional pieces’ under the sign of the encounter. And returning to the scene once more in a

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4 Spark, ‘The Poet’s House’, p. 69
9 ‘List of material’, Accession 10989/13, Muriel Spark Archive, Archives and Manuscripts Collections, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. A letter dated 17 November 1960 makes reference to this anthology, and while the latest publications noted in the various projected contents are from 1964 (‘Manhattan Memorandum’ and ‘Bluebell (My Cat)’, there is also a reference to the anthology, in a note in the same folder, referring to options to The Mandelbaum Gate following that novel’s publication, in 1965.
‘Footnote to “The Poet’s House”’ in 1985, Spark wrote that the ‘memory of that experience still returns to me, although it was over forty years ago. [...] The more I remember this episode the more it ramifies in my mind’.10

Intriguingly, in all of these accounts of Spark’s favourite symbol of her vocation, the ‘war job’ is very much in the background. If it has more than a by-the-by presence, it is as the most specific and concrete of those alternative ways of life rendered ‘unattractive beside the possibility of becoming a writer’11 – the ‘job in a branch of the civil service’ to which, ‘for a reason that is another story’, she ‘didn’t want to return too soon’12. Yet if literary service seems to eclipse civil service, Spark’s narration also gestures towards spy-craft: a scene in which a ‘trespasser’13 examines another person’s possessions without their knowledge, working out the stranger’s identity without leaving a trace of their own research, would not be out of place in any spy story. There is something of the secret agent in Spark’s call to a literary agent: she dissembles (there was no book as yet to offer and the implication of intimacy with MacNeice was false) but in service of a greater cause (the realisation of her literary vocation). And the dissemination of the episode as a fiction alongside an autobiographical essay, in various media, invites reflection on precisely what is disguised in black propaganda – the interaction of fact and fiction – as it does on the relation between narrative and the medium of its circulation and broadcast.14 Even the culmination of the episode in the actualisation of something abstract – an idea and a wish made solid with a concrete effect – resonates with the ‘propagation’ of beliefs. Spark thus figures this threshold into the world of literature as both an escape from, and an artfully distorted echo of, the world of political intelligence.

In *Curriculum Vitae*, the story of the moment Spark felt she ‘had truly entered the world of literature’15 appears again, but briefly, as the conclusion to the chapter recounting the war job in more detail. In an inversion of the spy-like entry in the literature, Spark’s initiation into secret service involves the foregrounding of literary motifs. At the Employment Bureau, the interviewer noticed with ‘great enthusiasm’ that Spark was carrying a copy of Ivy

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11 Spark, ‘The Poet’s House’, p. 69
14 Cf. Martin Stannard’s observation in *Muriel Spark*: ‘And there they sat, side by side: fact and fiction feasting off each other as a kind of statement about how their creator had ended up where she was’ (p. 350).
15 Spark, *Curriculum*, p. 162.
Compton-Burnett’s Elders and Betters, and they ‘were soon embarked on a long session of literary talk’. Spark’s ‘new friend’ thought Compton-Burnett one of the ‘most intelligent women writing in English’, and on the strength of the literary conversation asks Spark if she would ‘like to do secret work for the Foreign Office’. It is, as Victoria Stewart has astutely observed, a scene reminiscent of book-code, whereby ‘a novel can function at a material level as the means of enciphering and encoding information’. It leads to an interview with Sefton Delmer, the former European correspondent for the Daily Express heading up what Spark chooses, even in 1992, to refer to as the Political Intelligence Department (rather than the Political Warfare Executive for which it was the cover name). Spark got the job, believing her ‘friend’ to have given her ‘a strong recommendation for natural intelligence’. Compton-Burnett’s writerly intelligence, and Spark’s natural intelligence, open the door to Political Intelligence – ‘intelligence’ here glides with unsettling ease between the literary and the political spheres. Delmer, it is noted, was ‘brought up in Berlin where his father was a Professor of English at the University’, while Delmer’s ‘supporters and co-workers’ included writers including Richard Crossman, Bruce Lockhart, and a certain Ian Fleming, as well as ‘numerous professors and dons’, all of which made for a ‘concentrated brain tank’. The interaction of the literary and the political is always kept in view. ‘The job was wonderfully interesting’, Spark writes: ‘I played a very small part, but as a fly on the wall I took in a whole world of method and intrigue in the dark field of Black Propaganda or Psychological Warfare, and the successful and purposeful deceit of the enemy’. Rather as her entry into the

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16 Spark, Curriculum, p. 145.
17 Spark, Curriculum, p. 146.
19 The ‘Political Warfare Executive’ was already publicly known – Delmer himself refers to it as such in Black Boomerang (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1962). Spark’s preference for the ‘Political Intelligence’ is interestingly open to interpretation: it might be a residue of habitual professional secrecy or, on the contrary, a signal of her siding with the public perspective over that of the clandestine initiates. For the purposes of this essay, Spark’s preference also contributes to the stress she so often places on ‘intelligence’.
20 Spark, Curriculum, p. 147.
21 As Andrew Sinclair articulates in The Red and the Blue: Intelligence, Treason, and the Universities, intelligence can mean a ‘capacity and quality of mind’, a ‘condition of knowledge’, an ‘organization and a system, such as British intelligence’, and a ‘method of processing information’ (, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), p. 2. See also Stewart, Second World War, p. 21.
22 Spark, Curriculum, p. 148.
23 Spark, Curriculum Vitae, p. 147.
house of the famous poet involves a spy-like departure from the world of secret service, Spark here simultaneously enacts and distances herself from the activities described: she was playing ‘a small part’ (an actor in, but not necessarily of, a world of play-acting); she ‘took in’ (absorbed, understood, but also potentially fooled) this world of fake radio broadcasts; and she was a ‘fly on the wall’ of a world of flies-on-walls; and the idiomatic and figurative phrasings in themselves are indicative of the way Spark’s style so often plays on the punning duplicities present in the very texture of language.

It is this strange traffic between the ‘world of literature’ and the ‘world of method and intrigue’ that is in focus here – the way literary and political intelligence seem to serve as passports into – and out of – each other’s terrain in Spark’s imagination. Whether Spark’s work re-enacts the methods of black propaganda – or of spying and surveillance more generally – touches on an area of contention regarding Spark’s aesthetic, such as Christopher Ricks’ complaint that Spark’s novels ‘are extreme instances of novels in which the novelist is a private detective spying on his [sic] own characters’24, or the air of begrudging concession with which recognition of Spark’s ‘intelligence’ is sometimes bestowed, as when Alfred Kazin found The Mandelbaum Gate is ‘lifeless, cold, just worked up. It doesn’t exist at all as a work of art. It is just very intelligent’25 – a preference for warmth and emotion over coolness and intelligence inextricable here from gender politics. This essay seeks to complement scholarship that has opened up new perspectives on the way Spark’s imagination responds creatively and challengingly to her secret war work26 by putting particular emphasis on her literary and personal archives, drawing attention to the way Spark’s working methods – her sense of literary inspiration, creativity, and the way literature works on a readership – performs and subverts the logics of disinformation and the politics of the clandestine. Gravitating towards Spark’s most direct, yet enigmatic, treatment of Political Intelligence in The Hothouse by the East River (1973), critical tension centres on reading Spark’s literary

intelligence — formally, stylistically as well as thematically — as acting on political intelligence as both analogue and antagonist.

Spark’s sense of the writer’s calling corresponds in curious ways with the figure of the spy. In her account of her Edinburgh childhood in *Curriculum Vitae*, she stresses spy-like qualities as crucial to her formation: ‘I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t a person-watcher, a behaviourist’, Spark writes; she was an ‘avid listener’; and at home, in the company of guests, she ‘picked up the craft of being polite while people were present and laughing later’.27 Watching, listening, dissembling — what Spark stresses points towards a common ground of writers and spies, as observers holding something of themselves back in public, and as creators of masks or fictional identities. The portrait of the Spark-like artist in *Loitering with Intent* is figured as a kind of spy in the very title, and engages in ‘personal espionage’28 in the course of the novel. Spark was interested in ‘the importance of the lone wolf’ in espionage, taking notes from Richard Deacon’s *A History of the British Service* (1969) on the idea that the ‘crucial moment in all Secret Service work is when an agent sees the path ahead clearly, appreciates the objectives and, ignoring the rules, drives ahead on his own against opposition, if necessary, and with absolute conviction that his own methods are right.’29 It chimes with Spark’s sense that she would be ‘paralysed as a writer unless I write according to this queer dictatorial sense I have’.30 But the analogy should not be pressed too far: ‘Spies – their childish reliance upon their Chief, their Control, their senior Contact’, 31 she noted while working on *Territorial Rights*. The writer — at least, a writer so decisively independent as Spark — has no institutional ‘parent’ as such. And while the (ideal) spy is in a sense a parody, or travesty, of intercultural exchange — an identity combining the outward fluidity to pass undercover with the inward fixity to remain steadfastly loyal to the state served — Spark’s sense of her own writerly identity is characterised by internationalism and multiplicity — her sense of herself as a ‘Gentile Jewess’,32 as Scottish ‘by formation’ but ‘a constitutional exile’.33

31 Box 77, Folder 3, Tulsa.
Spark often figures literary inspiration in terms gesturing towards secret work, through a vocabulary of tele-communicational reception and broadcast. ‘I have no message to give to the world’, she wrote in 1963, but instead of the familiar refusal to reduce art to a message, adds that ‘it is the world that gives me messages’.\(^{34}\) In the ‘Author’s Note’ to *Voices at Play* published the same year, Spark’s ‘excuse’ for putting together short stories and short radio drama features – which she terms ‘ear-pieces’, suggesting both pieces to be listened to and a technology for listening with – is that they were both written on the ‘same creative wavelength’: ‘I turned my mind into a wireless set and let the characters play on my ear’.\(^{35}\) It pre-echoes characterisations of the writer’s process in both of the novels that come closest in Spark’s oeuvre to auto-fictional portraits of the artist: ‘I was tuning into voices without really hearing them as one does when moving from programme to programme on a wireless set’,\(^{36}\) writes Fleur in *Loitering with Intent*; you can sit ‘in front of a blank television set, just watching nothing; and sooner or later you can make your own programme much better than the mass product’,\(^{37}\) advises Mrs Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*.\(^{38}\) Spark often dramatizes the dissemination and reception of ‘voices’: *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori* are most fundamentally structured around an intruding voice – a character hears the voice of the narrator tapping at the keys, and contends with the possibility that she is a fictional creation overhearing her creator;\(^{39}\) an elderly community receives telephone calls conveying the message: ‘*Remember you must die*’.\(^{40}\) Such ‘messages’ are a subversion of psychological warfare: the unsettling truth rather than strategic lies, piercing rather than manufacturing a fabric of delusional beliefs. But more subtly, the texture of Spark’s writing, too, involves tuning into but also re-tuning language. The keynote is a fusion of the lyrical and the


\(^{34}\) Quoted in Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p. 289; n83, p. 565: Typed carbon copy of Letter, 12 August 1963, Spark to Harding (‘Pete’) Lemay, no place [i.e. no address] [London]; NLS.

\(^{35}\) Spark, *Voices at Play*, p. v.

\(^{36}\) Spark, *Loitering with Intent*, p. 81


\(^{38}\) In a brilliant essay on Spark’s auditory imagination, Patricia Waugh illuminates the stakes of this ‘tuning in’ to something outside the self in Spark’s sensibility, arguing that Spark’s ‘discovery of her own “voice” might be deemed to be the discovery of an ever greater aesthetic and ethical requirement to listen and discern, not to evacuate or repress the voices of others heard in one’s own’ (Patricia Waugh, ‘Muriel Spark’s “Informed Air”: The Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction’, *Textual Practice*, 32 (2018) (1), 633–58) p. 1,636.


idiomatic, as her titles already begin to indicate. *The Girls of Slender Means, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, A Far Cry from Kensington* – there is a metrical rightness in the phrasings, as if the titles were resonant lines from an absent poem or song, yet they also draw, equally artfully, on idiomatic, ‘received’ speech. We encounter ‘a far cry’ from girls ‘of slender means’ or in their ‘prime’, with a ‘public image’ and ‘territorial rights’ at stake, ‘loitering with intent’ or ‘aiding and abetting’, whose ‘only problem’ is a question of being in ‘the driver’s seat’, and who will ultimately arrive at the ‘finishing school’ (to note a few). Spark is a poet of received speech – tuning in to ‘quotes’ with no identifiable author, alerting us to the puns, ambiguities, and duplicities inherent in the language surrounding us.

Spark is consistently emphatic in her insistence on distinguishing fact and fiction. As Spark remarked to Frank Kermode in 1963, ‘I am interested in truth – absolute truth – and I don’t pretend that what I’m writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth – something inventive’. The continuities and contrasts between Spark’s sense of fiction and the ‘dark arts’ of black propaganda are particularly highlighted in a handwritten draft preface to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, where Spark stresses that it

> has always been my [plain conscious fixed] intention to practise the arts of pretence and counterfeit on the reader. I do not [But my fiction does not] pretend that I am [it is] doing otherwise […]. And so I should be embarrassed as a writer, also, if anyone should think this novel to be a literal history. And I hope it bears whatever truth is proper to it, or emerges by chance from an honest creative process."

Advertently practising ‘the arts of pretence and counterfeit’ as part of an ‘honest creative process’ is of course precisely the inverse of black propaganda – which is to say, Spark’s sense of her creative process can in one sense be read at its most fundamental as a form of literary intelligence that employs but also exposes, and counters, the logic of the Political Intelligence Department’s work.

Spark’s process also has more direct parallels with intelligence work. A consistent element of her practice was to put together files on her characters. This is in evidence already with her debut novel, *The Comforters*: the files include a spiral-bound reporter’s notebook.

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41 For *The Only Problem*, Spark also considered ‘The Finishing Touch’ (56. 7).
Department of Special Collections and University Archives. University of Tulsa.
detailing ‘Notes of dates, characters, and other facts’ for the “Present” time 1954-55’. The notes for *Territorial Rights* include really quite detailed character profiles, typed up in prose, redolent of the kind of ‘Top Secret’ profiles often incorporated into genre spy fiction – as when in *Casino Royale* Ian Fleming introduces the novel’s arch-villain by reproducing, as it were, the MI6 ‘Head of Archives’ biography of Le Chiffre. It is as if Spark were creating the factual documents on which to base her fictionalised version of events. For *Hothouse*, Spark entered all the characters into an Italian address book – an interesting choice of directory for a novel preoccupied with questions of home and expatriation, and indeed with telephonic communication. Each character’s ‘Nome’ is supplied under the appropriate letter, each of their page references in the ‘Telefono’ column. Such profiles seem to have been built up as Spark worked on the novels. A note envisaged a plan for Chapter 6 in which ‘Elsa rings everyone one by one’ is accompanied by the note-to-self, ‘See Proper Names’.

Fictional creation and investigation are quite close here: for Spark to look up where each character appears in the novel using this directory would have involved an air of giving them a call. Yet Spark also intimates keen awareness of potential investigators in her own archive. Her literary sensibility involved an acute sense of her own literary manuscripts as potentially ‘overlooked’ – and thus self-consciously performative. As Spark noted while working on *A Far Cry from Kensington*, as if addressing the researcher as much as herself: ‘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.’

Spark’s conception of the purpose or effects of literature is equally conversant with her experience in black propaganda, too. In an interview along with five other writers by Elizabeth Jane Howard for the centenary issue of *The Queen* (1961), one of the questions was: ‘What medium, first in all the arts, secondly in writing, do you think is the most influential today?’ For most of the writers it was self-evidently and emphatically television. Spark took a different line, suggesting ‘the art of rhetoric or persuasion in all the arts has the most immediate influence on the most people’ and that ‘real influence is long term and secret in its process. I think the short novel stands as good a chance as any other art form of

44 Box 13, Folder 7, Tulsa.
46 Box 28, Folder 3, Tulsa.
47 Box 28, Folder 3, Tulsa.
48 Box 21, Folder 9, Tulsa.
infiltrating the public mind’. The language of ‘secret’ influence and the ‘infiltration’ of the public mind is striking here, and represents an earlier formulation of some of the ideas, and vocabularies, that find full expression in Spark’s Blashfield address of 1970, ‘The Desegregation of Art’, which stands as a manifesto of sorts. Spark calls for ‘less emotion and more intelligence’ in ‘efforts to impress our minds and hearts’: the ‘art and literature of sentiment and emotion must go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule’.

In both pieces, Spark draws on the methods of black propaganda, but towards very different ends: literature ‘infiltrates and should fertilise our minds. It is not a special department’ – the choice of an institutional word is worth noting – ‘set aside for the entertainment and delight of the sophisticated minority’. Her meaning is ‘partly’ that ‘all art is propaganda since it propagates a point of view and provokes a response’, but the methods are redeployed to ‘bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge’. Even Spark’s claim that ‘the purpose of art is to give pleasure’ reaches back to her war work – it is echoed in Curriculum Vitae when Spark describes how she ‘had always been aware of “gaining experience” for some future literary work. […] But about the time I met Colin Methven’ – that is, while working at Milton Bryan – ‘I felt the need to “give experience”. I wanted to […] give something of the same effect of “experience” that I received. I wanted to give pleasure through my writings.’ That artistic process of giving experience received refracts the reception and broadcast of psychological warfare.

At least three of Spark’s novels in addition to Hothouse are readily apprehended as experimental engagements with the genre of spy fiction, even narrowly understood. In The Mandelbaum Gate (1965), a recent convert to Catholicism, Barbara Vaughan, goes on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and becomes embroiled in a spy caper involving a British diplomat stationed in Jerusalem at the time of the Eichmann Trial. The Abbess of Crewe (1974) satirises the Watergate scandal and surveillance society as high farce re-located to a

50 Howard, ‘Writers in the tense present’, p. 145.
52 Spark, Desegregation’, p. 27.
56 Spark, Curriculum, p. 155.
57 Martin Stannard interprets this passage differently, as a ‘telling’ sign that ‘sexual passion’ is being replaced by ‘aesthetic passion’, with the desire to communicate ‘artistic rather than physical’ (Muriel Spark, p. 66).
nunnery. And in *Territorial Rights* (1979), a defector is pursued by the Bulgarian secret service in Venice. Professional spies also surface frequently in pivotal ways in other works, even if these are less explicitly engaged with spy fiction as genre. A character in Spark’s only stage play, *Doctors of Philosophy*, performed in 1962, is a ‘very hush-hush’ nuclear physicist ‘doing secret work’, while in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) – something of a companion piece to *Hothouse*, in that it revisits the last years of the Second World War – Nicholas Farrington is an employee of ‘one of those left-hand Departments of the Foreign Office, the doings of which the right hand did not know. It came under Intelligence’. The professional spy is a point of reference for some of Spark’s most famous characters, too: Jean Brodie says to ‘her set at large’ of the girl who is to betray her, ‘“Sandy will make an excellent Secret Service agent, a great spy”’, while Lise in *The Driver’s Seat*, having bought a paperback at the airport, ‘seems to display it deliberately, as if she is one of those spies one reads about who effect recognition by pre-arranged signals and who verify their contact with another agent by holding a certain paper in a certain way’. And all this is, of course, only to note the most literal manifestations of professional espionage work in Spark’s fictional universe: if we open our gates to ‘non-professional’ spying – essentially, as is frequently noted, Spark’s entire oeuvre is pervasively concerned with secrecy, spying, deception, fakery, forgery, and so on. If *The Hothouse by the East River* is Spark’s most direct fictional treatment of the world of secret service that she had herself experienced, it is also highly elliptical. The compositional history itself was notably long and fitful. Spark worked purposively on the novel across 1965 while still living in New York – it would have been the direct follow-up to *The Mandelbaum Gate* – but it went on the backburner in favour of writing *The Public*.

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58 Muriel Spark, *Doctors of Philosophy* (1963) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 31. The drama involves characters making secret tape recordings of each other, as well as featuring a servant, one ‘Mrs S.’, riffling through her employers’ papers.


61 Spark, *The Driver’s Seat* (London: MacMillan, 1970), p. 57. The novel’s opening scenes and the journey to the unnamed city in southern Europe evoke the atmosphere as well as the tropes of spy fiction, while the novel is also, of course, more deeply about the secret of agency. The initial title for *The Driver’s Seat* had been ‘Special Mission’, evoking the secret agent theme more strongly; Spark then tried ‘Predestination’, before settling on *The Driver’s Seat* (Box 17, Folder 1, Tulsa).

Image, the first of Spark’s novels to be completed and published, in 1968, after her move to Rome.\textsuperscript{63} It was not until after The Driver’s Seat (1970) and Not to Disturb (1971) that Spark brought Hothouse to completion, for publication in 1973. So long and fitful a production was unusual for Spark, for whom the writing process itself, by her own account, involved intensive concentration over a shorter period – required because with each book she sought to attain, and sustain, a certain ‘tone of writing suitable for each theme’.\textsuperscript{64} We can only speculate as to whether this suggests any equivocation. The novel does deal with secret work and its psychological impact, so the experience and material is politically and personally sensitive, and it is not always self-evident whether certain notes in the archive – ‘Spies finished [...] Very’; ‘Spies – Old Hat, Very very’\textsuperscript{65} – represent material for possible incorporation within the novel or notes-to-self. The novel does thematise the sense that ‘Spies don’t matter any more’,\textsuperscript{66} but similar notes in the files for other spy-themed fictions suggest a certain resistance to the genre of spy fiction: a ‘Literary Note’ for Territorial Rights reads: ‘Get as soon as possible out of the spy-ring complex. Keep political realities in the background as realities of which the action of the book is a symbol’\textsuperscript{67}. What is clear is that the ‘tone’ of Hothouse opens onto, and haunts, the startling sequence of novels published soon after Spark’s move to Italy – audaciously avant-garde while keyed in to popular genres, often experimenting with the present tense, all engaging in novel ways with the \textit{nouveau roman}, in particular those of Alain Robbe-Grillet. To put it another way, Spark’s way in to writing ‘literally’ about the world of secret war work she had experienced during the war involved passing through a re-figuring of the possibilities of the novel before Spark found a way to bring it to fruition.

The novel is also a study in distance, geographical and temporal, with Paul and Elsa Hazlett’s past as ghosts of the Compound in England in 1944 haunting high society expatriate life in New York in the 1960s or 1970s (the precise date is not given). The world of Political Intelligence haunts Madison Avenue, inviting consideration of the continuities between black propaganda and the world of advertising and public relations so iconically represented by this street: Elsa may look east towards England and the past, but the Pepsi-Cola and Pan-Am

\textsuperscript{63} Stannard judges that it was ‘probably around early June 1967’ that Spark ‘put Hothouse aside and began to develop her dream story into The Public Image’; Hothouse was then ‘back in production’ by January 1968 (\textit{Muriel Spark}, p. 337).
\textsuperscript{64} Elizabeth Jane Howard, ‘Writers in the tense present’, \textit{The Queen 2: 6, Centenary Issue 1861-1961} (133-146), p. 137. NLS Acc. 10607/487.
\textsuperscript{65} 28_3, 3054.
\textsuperscript{66} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{67} Box 76, Folder 7, Tulsa.
signs, as well as the United Nations and Welfare Island, are the main sights in her line of vision as she goes on ‘looking and receiving’. Spark also situates her story of the Compound so that it suffuses other spheres of life. It is fundamentally a story of marital breakdown and male sexual jealousy over an inscrutable woman: political secrecy is a background and theatre for more personal experiences of conjugal secrecy, betrayal, and jealousy. Indeed, issues of transparency and exposure are manifest in the very fabric of the world this cast of characters inhabit. Among Spark’s cuttings is an article with the title ‘People in glass houses start getting scared’, which reports that wealthy New Yorkers had been suffering from “light syndrome” caused by ‘living in glass houses high above the street’: ‘The symptoms are vertigo, an obsessive feeling of being watched, and a desire to retreat to dark corners. The cause is the stress of living and working behind modernistic plate-glass walls.’

From its opening sentence, Hothouse is concerned with an art of reception and tuning in. ‘If it were only true that all’s well that ends well, if only it were true.’ We enter the novel as if exiting Shakespeare’s play, or as if the narrator has just heard someone quoting from the now axiomatic title, wishing the world would conform to the resolutions of comedy but knowing that it won’t. The axiom is enfolded in an almost – but not quite – repeated idiomatic phrasing. ‘If it were only true’ is not quite the same as ‘if only it were true’; on the contrary, while the more familiar phrasing in the latter expresses the thought, it is not true but I wish it were, the opening phrase, ‘If it were only true’, expresses the contrasting thought that it is true, but not only true – true but also something else. The suggestion seems to be that truth cannot be isolated: truth may be neutral ‘by itself’ (to echo Spark in Curriculum Vitae), but not in its significance or effects. Near-idiomatic companions to the ‘true’ might well trip off our tongues, each with different implications: true and – false, kind, unpalatable, dangerous, etc. And grammatical convention wants to follow the comma with ‘then’ (as in, if it were only true, then it would follow that…). But what follows is the more familiar expression ‘if only it were true’. Truth is very slippery in this syntax, and echoes distort. The yearning evoked by ‘if only’, amplified by the lyricism of a near repetition, masks unsettling, contrary meanings. The first page proceeds to construct a world largely through idiom:

She stamps her right foot.

70 Spark, Hothouse, 3.
71 Spark, Curriculum, p. 11.
She says, ‘I’ll try the other one,’ sitting down to let the salesman lift her left foot and nicely interlock it with the other shoe.

He says, ‘They fit like a glove.’ The voice is foreignly correct and dutiful. A foot is stamped (as feet often are). A leg may be being pulled (‘try the other one’). And shoes fit ‘like a glove’ – the mixing of plural and singular contributing to what, on reflection, is a comically incongruous image for perfect congruity. This is a world in which the idiomatic, the language in the air, is tortuous. As often in Spark’s writing, an arresting grammatical kink jangles enigmatically alongside these familiar but strange sayings. What does ‘foreignly correct and dutiful’ mean? We could unpack wordy paraphrases: the voice is that of someone speaking correctly, but with a foreign accent; or that of someone speaking with a correctness that suggests the dutiful effort of a non-native speaker. But the application of the adverb also implies that the ‘correct’ can always be qualified or modified (there are different kinds of correctness) and that there may be a kind of correctness that derives from foreignness. The complexity of the relationships among foreignness, correctness, and duty – like those between truth and its effects – are implied in the language itself before we encounter these issues at the level of plot, with the arrival of the shoe-shop assistant who may or may not be the German double agent, Claus Kiel, with whom Paul suspects Elsa had an affair.

Spark’s fictions often take shape around the prospect of the figurative becoming literal, or the literal becoming figurative with concrete consequences. In a key scene in *Territorial Rights*, Lina Pancev literally acts out a figure of speech, dancing on her father’s grave; *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is in part a study of the ramifications of coercion into maxims (as in Jean Brodie’s grooming of the Brodie set as the ‘crème de la crème’). Spark

73 The title and the opening dialogue with a shoe salesman who says ‘They fit like a glove’ were among Spark’s first concrete impulses for this novel, and the scene is repeated refrain. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p. 318. A note in the *Hothouse* files contains the phrase ‘The description fits like a glove’ (28_5_3147).
74 In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for example, Spark’s acute insight into the violence of groups registers in a recurring grammar whereby the plural is rendered singular: a ‘protective fence of bicycle’ – not bicycles – is established ‘between the sexes’ in the opening paragraph (p. 5); ‘All of the Brodie set counted on its’ – not their – ‘fingers’ (p. 6), creating an image of a weirdly conglomerate being. In ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ (1957) (*Complete Stories*, 278-283), the narrating woman, whose story inhabits the title of a song, apprehends the literal truth of her situation – of having left her murdered self behind – at the point at which she ‘thought how nearly no one at all I was, since even the conductor had […] passed me by’ (p. 281).
creates a characteristic terrain from that which worries Paul in *Hothouse*, when he recalls watching Elsa ‘concealing a smile’ and ‘thinks of the phrase, “tongue in cheek”, and is confused between what it means and how it would work if Elsa, with her head averted towards the river, actually put her tongue in her cheek’.76 The ‘hothouse’ by the East River a prime example. It is not a hothouse, but it is a hot house; it literalises an Augustinian vision of purgatory, and figures a double artificiality: what would have been an artificial environment for flora is doubly so for the fauna who live there, along with the ‘plants and ferns any normal person would put there’.77 The literal-figurative dynamic keys in acutely to the euphemistic world of espionage – replete with code names, cover names, and nicknames, of Double-O numbers, of the *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* of John Le Carré’s re-imagining of the Kim Philby scandal, or indeed as in the ‘Political Intelligence Department’ as cover for the Political Warfare Executive. Spark folds this dynamic into the fundamental premise of the novel: former intelligence spooks are literally ghosts, and Elsa’s shadow has a life independent of Elsa, and is effectively ‘shadowing’ her. When Elsa’s psychoanalyst tells her they have a “‘good bit of ground to cover’” she challenges ‘cover’ as a “‘peculiar word to use”’ – “‘I thought psychiatry was meant to uncover something’”78 – but within a few pages, Paul is shouting that Helmut Kiel has “‘got every cover’”79 under a false identity as a spy.

The range of possible meanings located within language links to the theme of codes and code-breaking – something with a pronounced presence in Spark’s own experience. As she explained in a letter of 21 May, 1954 to the National Insurance Officer, in protest against the disallowance of the National Health benefits she had been unable to claim, her ‘condition’ was ‘due to overwork and insufficient rest; I am a literary critic and had been working very hard on a book which I had been commissioned to write. Briefly, 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.’80 While malnutrition, an addiction to amphetamine appetite suppressant, Dexedrine, poverty, overwork, would likely be considered the ‘causes’ of Spark’s ‘condition’, the specifics of her hallucinations were furnished by the world of espionage. The ‘world of method and intrigue’ had infiltrated the fabric of the world at large, and literature was among its vehicles: T.S. Eliot’s *Confidential Clerk* and the programme for its performance contained, Spark believed,

76 Spark, *Hothouse*, p. 5
77 Spark, *Hothouse*, p. 13
78 Spark, Hothouse, p. 10.
80 Letter of 21 May, 1954, Muriel Spark Archive, Accession 10607.8, NLS.
secret messages of insidious intent. The ‘difficulty of describing this sort of experience’ is what Spark so creatively rises to in *The Comforters*, and Spark remained interested in the analogy between literary criticism and code-breaking (a note in the files for *Territorial Rights* reads: ‘spy activist – like that of literary critic. Analysis of a method.’) Spark incorporated code-breaking and word searches into some of her working notes for *Hothouse*, playing with a ‘Mix-up of initials’ (including SIS, MI6, MI5, IRA, FBI), and Spark both solicits and satirises an impulse towards reading for coded significance in the novel. On the one hand, *Hothouse* is replete with coded significance. Character names all invite symbolic reading: Paul and Pierre (the French equivalent of Peter) make a near apostolic allusion out of father and son (and St Paul’s questions on his rights as an apostle in the Corinthians (9:5) is very much Paul Hazlett’s question: ‘Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas [i.e. Peter]?’). The name ‘Elsa’, which means ‘pledged to God’, anagrammatically includes the thematically pertinent words ‘sale’ and ‘seal’, as well as phonetically suggesting elsewhere and else-her, as if she were being made someone else (it is close, too, to ‘Elise’, the name of the friend in ‘The Poet’s House’, and ‘Lise’, the name of the protagonist of *The Driver’s Seat*). Kiel – who may or may not be the real Kiel – is an anagram of ‘like’, a cipher of similarity, as well as near-echoing ‘kill’ and ‘keel’. Princess Poppy’s surname, Xavier, derives from Basque and means a ‘new house’ – and indeed there is a surreal mirroring between the hothouse apartment, and the Princess’s breasts which serve as a hothouse for her silkworms. But the novel is also an allegorical fable about liberation from the paroxysms of code-breaking: one day, a woman tries on a shoe, and the shoe fits (like Cinderella); but the shoe has codes on the soles. Trying to crack the code leads to an exile of madness. And the moral of the story, so to speak, is that if the shoe fits, the way to get home is by ‘dancing so hard you couldn’t read the secret code on the soles’.

The issue that has proven most contentious in drawing an analogy between Spark’s approach as a writer and the dynamics of espionage is that of Spark’s ‘omniscient’ narrative perspective. As Margaret Drabble put it, events in Spark’s fictions ‘play themselves out as though watched by God from a very great distance and another timescale’, while ‘the author spies upon her creations, and lets them hurtle towards disaster. Maybe’, Drabble wonders,

81 ‘If there is any code concealed’, Eliot responded, ‘I shall be interested to know what it is’. (qtd. Stannard 157)).
82 Box 77, Folder 3, Tulsa.
83 ‘Mix-up of initials’, *Hothouse*, Box 28, Folder 3, Tulsa.
‘she sees herself as God’s spy, observing with amusement the scurrying antics of a fallen world.’

Spark’s much-discussed use of prolepsis – as when it is revealed at the beginning of the third chapter that Lise will die in *The Driver’s Seat* – is central to this. To single this out as omniscient is in itself somewhat problematic – to reveal where a story set in the past is going is not to presume to be able to tell the future, or to act on one’s characters more emphatically than any other creator of fiction. Spark’s characteristic gesture is to let the cat out of the bag, and then ask us to consider how mysterious the cat it. But Spark’s ‘omniscience’, if we call it that, is one of surface rather than depth – and in her early Italian novels especially, the narrative performance is as distinctive for what it foregoes to know about its fictional creations as for what it presumes to know. As Spark remarked in an interview with Martin Stannard, ‘three of my novels are very much *nouveaux romans*:

‘I rather liked [Robbe-Grillet’s] idea of the novel […] that you leave out “he felt” […] no thoughts or feelings. You’re just observing, that’s all. A sighter. You’re only seeing what people do. You read between the lines what people think […] We’ve got no right whatsoever to say […] what people are thinking, feeling, because you don’t know. […] It really gives you another dimension because people fill it in.’

Spark’s emphasis on the question of our ‘right’ to enter into the minds of fictional characters resonates with the terms with which Czech writer Milan Kundera – at the time living in exile in Paris, in flight from Soviet censorship and state surveillance – characterises one of the most familiarly characteristic modernist techniques: ‘Joyce set a microphone within Bloom’s head. Thanks to the fantastic espionage of interior monologue, we have learned an enormous amount about what we are. But, myself, I cannot use that microphone.’ Kundera’s analogy between interior monologue and technologies of state surveillance open a political as well as an epistemological dimension to that animating paradox of much modernist writing – a foregrounded sense that ‘[w]e do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others’, as Virginia Woolf put it, dramatized through the performance of the impossible feat of entry

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86 Spark, *Driver’s Seat*, p. 37.
into other minds as one of the most emphatic elements in the form itself. The sequence of novels that began with work on *Hothouse* and come to another moment of transition with *The Abbess of Crewe* key in to similar concerns in their form and narrative perspective.

Spark suggests ‘three’ of her novels are ‘very much’ *nouveaux romans*. Whether or not she considered *Hothouse* among them (the five novels from *The Public Image* to *The Abbess of Crewe* are often read as a stylistic ‘phase’), her sense of the *nouveau roman* as including ‘no thoughts and feelings’ points to a way in which *Hothouse* significantly breaks from such an approach – or rather, draws on and re-figures its resources, and in such a way as to foreground questions of narrative perspective, knowledge, and secrecy. *Hothouse* is very much a *nouveau roman* in its treatment of Elsa, most emphatically, and most other characters encountered in the novel; but it is very much not a *nouveau roman* in its approach to Paul, and to a lesser extent, the son, Pierre. After the opening scene in the shoe shop, and Paul and Elsa’s subsequent discussion of Kiel – all of which is ‘sighted’ – there follows a declarative assertion of what is in Paul’s head, after which the narrative opens into free indirect style and interior monologue:

Paul thinks: She doesn’t turn her head, she watches the East River.

One day he thought he had caught her, in profile, as he moved closer to her, smiling at Welfare Island as if it were someone she recognised. […]

Is it possible that she is smiling again, he thinks; could she be smiling to herself, retaining humorous reflections to herself? Is she sly and sophisticated, not mad at all?

Entry into Paul’s mind is achieved by something like a stage direction (there is a touch of ‘Lucky thinks’ about it). The peremptory economy of this shift from the apparent to that which is knowable only in fiction draws attention to the ‘fantastic espionage’ it involves.

Throughout the novel, the narrative wends in and out of Paul’s consciousness – Spark even considered, but excised, a passage referring to Paul’s ‘stream of consciousness’ in the draft. Yet while Spark does allow the narrator the ‘right’ to say what is being thought or felt, to gain entry into Paul’s mind is to encounter a mind possessed by jealous frustration as it only

91 See for example Rodrey Stenning Edgecombe, *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), on her ‘exilic era’ (p. 3).
92 For Pierre’s, thoughts and feelings: 26.
94 The question of point of view was a recurrent concern for Spark in composing the novel: ‘Style –’, she noted at one point, ‘Try use of the word “one” […] One could see that she … etc.’ Tulsa, 28_4_3130)
95 Box 26, Folder 29, Tulsa.
‘ripples over the surface’\textsuperscript{96} of the mind of another, that of Elsa. Paul, in effect, spies on Elsa: he ‘stands […] behind her and listens’,\textsuperscript{97} and at times almost practises black propaganda on her, as when he seeks to ‘win her round, meaning to insinuate an idea into her head that might fetch her back to reason’.\textsuperscript{98} But Elsa remains inscrutable. Like Paul, we only listen to her and watch her ‘looking and receiving’.\textsuperscript{99} Elsa’s opacity is part of the novel’s interest in the idea of the woman as secret, and part of Spark’s subversion of the image of women in intelligence (and of intelligence). Pierre’s assertion of his mother that ‘[m]ore than one can possibly calculate, she’s intelligent’ causes Paul to feel ‘a sudden panic because it is infinitely easier for a man to leave a beautiful woman, to walk out and leave her, and be free, than to leave a woman of intelligence beyond his calculation and her own grasp. “No,” Paul shouts. “She’s crazy. I have to think for her, I have to do her thinking all the time.”’\textsuperscript{100} Spark’s narrative mode trespasses most emphatically, then, only on the mind of the trespasser – a male fantasy about a woman. That such knowledge is the privileged domain of fiction – one that fulfils as well as counters the aspirations of political surveillance – is overtly highlighted. The Compound security officer, Colonel Tylden, had ‘wanted to find out how far Paul had been put off his stroke’ through interviewing him, but ‘Paul’s jitters are not available to human eyes this afternoon in the early spring of England, 1944’.\textsuperscript{101}

Spark’s study of political intelligence crafts of voice and point of view that simultaneously resembles the perspective of one of ‘God’s spies’, and draws attention to its limits, pointing always to that which lies beyond human knowledge. As a novel so attentive to ways of knowing and unknowing, it seems fitting that a central premise of the published book – that it is a ghost story – was by no means a pre-ordained element of the plot for its author, but was rather something she tuned into. At the bottom of sequence of sundry notes on a ‘TELEPHONE MESSAGE’ sheet, Spark wrote: ‘Elsa dead – ’. A little further into the same folder, she asked: ‘Can it possibly be possibly be she is dead? – ’, and began working through a possible scenario: ‘She died during the war. This was Paul’s obsession – his conception of her as she would have developed, so that she has become a ghost and is haunting him? […]’.\textsuperscript{102} She worked through an approach: ‘If the above is accepted – insert

\textsuperscript{96} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{97} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{98} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{100} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{101} Spark, \textit{Hothouse}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{102} Box 28, Folder 3, Tulsa.
Paul concealed watching every move when she is alone. Make it credible’. And finally, on a page covered mainly with the doodles of mosaics that were among her preferred patterns, Spark arrives at the simple and decisive realisation of what she was writing: ‘He died in the bomb. She died in the bomb.’ Like Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, it is a novel that ends with its own beginning, and invites us to read again in the knowledge of its ending. In conceiving of these ghosts of secret work, Spark’s imagination returns again to a train journey in the last years of the war, but there is no delay, and no House of the Famous Poet in this hothouse encounter. ‘I could write a book’, remarks Elsa at one point. If it were only true, if only it were true.

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103 Box 28, Folder 3, Tulsa.