

Muriel Spark and the Business of Poetry, or *All the Poems of Muriel Spark*, New Directions, New York; and Carcanet, England, xii, pp129, 2004.

It has been said of the American poet Randall Jarrell that in his poems he used his talent, while in his book reviews he used his genius. Of the Scottish writer-in-exile Muriel Spark, it can be claimed that it is her genius she has exploited in her novels, while demonstrating a fine talent in her poetry and verse.

Spark's literary *oeuvre* consists principally of twenty-two novels and several collections of short stories compared with one long poem and other verse, *The Fanfarlo. And other verse* (1952) and three volumes of collected poems: the *Collected Poems I* (1967); *Going up to Sotheby's* (1982), described as 'the most complete collection of Muriel Spark's poems yet published'; and the recent *All the Poems of Muriel Spark*.

Yet, *All the Poems* does not live up to its promise; while it purports to represent the complete poetic *œuvre* of Spark, it is only a selection, but a good selection, of those poems that Spark and her editor, Barbara Epler, have chosen to include. Quirkily arranged 'thematically', this collection, as presented thus, does not show the development of Spark's relationship with poetry over the past fifty years, either in technical matters or aesthetic concerns. As a result of this 'thematic' arrangement, the reader is deprived of any kind of linear perspective that a chronological approach would provide. More appropriately, this collection could have been sub-titled, 'Barbara Epler enjoys some of the poems of Muriel Spark.' For this would be a more accurate description of this publication.

But of course it is as a pioneering novelist and brilliant exponent of the short story that Spark is best known, and it is for her originality in narrative technique that literary critics have principally recognised the significance of her work in fiction, which helped shape the post-war novel, and so opened-up the possibilities for the 'post-modern' novel in all its fractured and disjointed beauty and ugliness. (One wonders could there have been Jeanette Winterson without Muriel Spark?) And while having made her way first as a poet, literary editor and literary biographer in post-war London, it was as a short story writer that Spark first came to prominence at the very end of 1951, when she won *The Observer* short story competition for her surreal and, in places, richly poetic 'The Seraph and the Zambesi.' Reading Spark's 'The Seraph and The Zambesi' more than fifty years after its composition, one can easily sense the immediate effect this piece would have had on those judges who numbered David Astor, Philip Toynbee and Terence Kilmartin. The language of this Christmas story shows some influence of the paradoxically arresting ordinariness of Eliot's images as well as some echoes of Pound, along with the powerfully rich and exotic images from Spark's own imagination, which must qualify as a kind of early magic-realist writing.

After escaping from a bad marriage and leaving Rhodesia in 1944, Spark came to London, first working in Political Intelligence in the Foreign Office and then in Information at the War Office. (This period Spark writes about in some detail in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*.) Following the war, in 1946, when Spark was living at the Helena Club, Lancaster Gate, W2, on which she was later to base the May of Teck Club in *The Girls of Slender Means*, her first 'mature' poem was published in

The Poetry Review, the journal of the Poetry Society, 'a magazine of general poetic interest.' This poem, 'On Seeing the Picasso-Matisse Exhibition, London, December 1945' won the Premium Competition, a money prize, in that issue. Also published in *The Poetry Review* that year were two other poems by Spark, 'The Victoria Falls' and 'Spring Hat, 1946.'

Of these three mature poems, only 'The Victoria Falls' has been allowed into *All the Poems of Muriel Spark*. And none of these three were included in the *Collected Poems I* or in the later collection, *Going up to Sotheby's*. Most other poems that Spark published in *The Poetry Review* in the important years 1946 and 1947 are similarly absent from *All the Poems* - these include 'Autumn', a trio of sonnets; the long poem 'The Well'; 'The Robe and the Song'; 'Birthday'; and 'Omega'. (The Yeats-like poem 'The Robe and the Song' was anthologised in 1961 in *Poems I Remember*, edited by Christmas Humphries. Why it should be excised from the present collection seems to be an arbitrary decision.) Also completely absent from this present collection are Spark's juvenilia, those poems that had appeared in the early 1930s in *Gillespie's High School Magazine*. This is a great shame, as some of Muriel's early poems are technically accomplished and show a keen understanding of rhythm and form as well as a confident handling of subject-matter. Although these are the writings of a young teenager, the observations made in some of these poems are remarkable. A separate section of juvenilia and early poems might easily have been included in the present collection. Their absence is a loss and the incompleteness of the present collection is frustrating.

Having established herself as a contributor to *The Poetry Review*, Spark became in October 1947 its editor, having already served for the previous six months as General Secretary of the Poetry Society. These two posts she combined, and so began literally Spark's association with the 'business of poetry'. Ultimately a victim both of her own success as an administrator and politician, as well as of the machinations of various opponents within the old order of the Poetry Society, including the redoubtable Marie Stopes, Spark's achievements during her short and stormy tenure as editor of *The Poetry Review* were to re-align the editorial position to include serious, contemporary poetry and to introduce professional poets who would receive payment for their work. In attempting to achieve her aims, Spark would also have to dislodge the amateur versifiers whose work, by such glorious hands as Editha Melbourne, H. Broadberry Seaman and W.T. Shorthose, had previously overwhelmed the pages of that journal. The robust editorials that Spark promulgated as editor were devoted largely to explaining the 'moderns' to an obviously reactionary readership, for whom poetry and verse ended with the Georgians. This was an uphill struggle to which Spark had initially been equal, though within eighteen months the old order had worn her down. Several fellow poets, dismayed by the news of her departure, wrote to the Society's President in support of Spark's editorship, under which 'the Poetry Society became a live and vital medium for British Poetry which can ill afford this loss.' Among the signatories were: John Bayliss, Alex Comfort, G.S. Fraser, Robert Greacen, Hugo Manning, Michael Redgrove, Howard Sergeant, Derek Stanford and John Waller, each of whom wished to dissociate their names from *The Poetry Review* in future. Responding to John Heath-Stubbs' accounts of the open warfare that had broken out at the Poetry Society, the philosopher Austen Farrer remarked, 'we thought that academic life was ruthless, but this is nature red in tooth and claw!' It is worth

mentioning here that the device of the Poetry Society (in those years) was ‘where there is no vision, the people perish,’ the irony of which could not be lost on Muriel Spark and which she was later to incorporate into the belief-system of her own Jean Brodie.

Perhaps Spark’s most important and lasting achievement while at the Poetry Society was her decision to ‘make it new’ by introducing young professional poets to *The Poetry Review*, so raising the standard of work and making it a serious journal. (At one point, it was thought that Kathleen Raine might be invited to succeed Spark as General Secretary and Editor, but John Gawsworth was appointed her successor. In his first editorial in *The Poetry Review*, Gawsworth did grudgingly acknowledge Spark’s achievements as innovator, and did in part continue her work by representing the work of other serious poets, though he had to take extreme care not to alienate completely the old order who remained in favour of amateur versifiers.) Spark’s ‘new’ writers had included, not surprisingly, Dannie Abse, John Bayliss, Roy Campbell, Alex Comfort, Patric Dickinson, Ian Finlay, G.S. Fraser, Robert Greacen, Michael Hamburger, James Kirkup, Laurie Lee, Hugo Manning, Kathleen Raine, Michael Redgrove, Peter Russell, John Heath-Stubbs, Vernon Watkins and Andrew Young. Dylan Thomas had apparently promised a poem for Spark, but this did not materialise. Ruth Pitter had also been an earlier contributor, as was Howard Sergeant, and both continued to contribute under Spark’s editorship. Many of these poets were later to write for William Cookson in his new *Agenda*; some continue to appear in this journal.

This ‘busyness’ with poetry as editor of *The PR* did take Spark away from her own writing, though after leaving the Poetry Society, from which she had chosen to be dismissed rather than resign, she founded *Forum*, a magazine for poems and short stories. This ran for only two issues from 1949-50 and included poems by Roy Campbell, Kathleen Raine, Hugo Manning and Henry Treece. Spark had also planned to start up another poetry review to be called *Trend*, though no issues ever appeared. Having been admitted in March 1949 to the Society of Authors, Spark was also writing for such poetry magazines as *New English Weekly*, *Poetry Commonwealth*, and for Howard Sergeant’s *Outposts*. With Sergeant, Spark had earlier co-edited a short-lived poetry magazine, *Reassessment*. It was at this time too that Spark had been submitting poems to various publishers for publication in a single volume. From Routledge, Kegan and Paul; Longmans; Lehmann; Faber; and Chatto and Windus, Spark received polite refusals and it was not until after her success in *The Observer* short story competition in 1951 that Erica Marx’s Hand and Flower Press published Spark’s *The Fanfarlo. And other verse* in 1952. The anonymous reviewer in their 2 January 1953 review in *The Times Literary Supplement* praised ‘The Fanfarlo’s’ ‘virtues of a long poem over the occasional lyrics’ and noted echoes of Burns, Coleridge and Yeats.

Between leaving the Poetry Society and the publication of her first collection of poetry and verse in 1952, Spark been working most productively in the area of literary biography, *Tribute to Wordsworth* (1950, with Derek Stanford); her own *Child of Light* (1951), a reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley; and with Stanford again *My Best Mary*, selected letters of Mary Shelley; a study of John Masefield, whom she had heard read in her girlhood Edinburgh in the early 1930s; an

edition of Bronte letters; and a selection of letters of John Henry Newman, also with Stanford. These publications speak for themselves in describing Spark's 'busyness' with writing. Although she had not abandoned poetry entirely, her energies and efforts were being channelled in other directions. Her success in *The Observer* short story competition in 1951 would naturally have made her attractive to publishers, but a period of ill-health following her conversion to Catholicism had intervened, and it was a few years before Macmillan commissioned her first novel. Again, Spark writes in some detail about this period in *Curriculum Vitae*.

Spark's first novel *The Comforters* (1957) was well received critically and there followed in the next four years eight new works: five novels, including her pivotal *Brodie*; a critical study of Emily Bronte, a collection of short stories; and 'stories and ear pieces.' Given this tremendous 'busyness' with writing, it is not surprising that from the early 1960s, when Spark's career as a novelist became firmly established, her poetic output should diminish. The *Collected Poems I* (1967) contains only ten new poems, and the next fifteen years saw very little poetic activity. Spark's next collection *Going up to Sotheby's* (1982) contains only two new poems, while in the present collection, there is only one poem from 1984; five from the 1990s; and thirteen poems composed between 2000 and 2003.

Had Muriel Spark not submitted her winning story 'The Seraph and The Zambesi' to *The Observer* competition in 1951, it is not too fanciful to suggest that her career as a poet would have been greatly different. She would have continued to write as a poet and her work in poetry would doubtless have been as prolific and as influential as her work in fiction. But, Spark chose fiction and not poetry. As one of the most important and influential novelists of the post-war period, Spark's reputation has already been firmly established for more than thirty years. And testimony to her great achievements as a novelist has come in the form of numerous prizes, honours and accolades.

In a short essay on the poetry of James Joyce, Seamus Heaney has remarked, 'for some novelists - Hardy and Lawrence, for example - verse offers itself as a medium for extending and refining apprehensions that their prose fiction has failed to render altogether satisfactorily. There are poems by Hardy and Lawrence which we would be inclined to keep in preference to certain parts of their novels. The same, however, cannot be said of Joyce. Sure, the poems are well-tuned and well-turned, there is a technical fastidiousness about them, a touch of elegy and pathos. But their chief interest is that they were written by Joyce, their chief surprise the surprise of contrast with other parts of the *œuvre*.'

What Heaney says about Joyce, I believe, can also be said about Muriel Spark. That this should be so, it cannot dull Spark's brilliance or diminish her international significance as a novelist.

Michael Lister
Edinburgh
December 2004