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Muriel Spark as Auto-Biographer in *Curriculum Vitae*

Anna Kirkwood

Examining Muriel Spark's main aims as an auto-biographer in her work *Curriculum Vitae* brings important resources in the exploration of the genre of autobiographical writing. This, with theoretical engagement, allows consideration of the critical issues surrounding the roles of author and reader in the construction of the literary self. Spark demands the reader participate in the construction of textual meaning; overturning the conventions of autobiography, satirising its claims to omniscience and highlighting the impossibility of an authentic voice with regards to the self.

"How would you describe yourself?"

"I can't"

*"Of course you can't! I asked foolishly. The lemon cannot taste bitterness, it only drinks the rain."*¹

Autobiographical writing has been a topic of central interest among literary scholars in recent decades, sparking various theories and criticisms. One main problem is defining and regulating the genre because autobiography, as a hybrid form, unsettles distinctions and offers no stable parameters. Laura Marcus in her *Auto/biographical Discourses* suggests that autobiography is a major source of interest because of its instability in terms of postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object. She argues that:

In an intellectual context in which, as Raymond Williams has perceptibly argued, these are seen as irreconcilably distinct, autobiography will appear

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1 Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), 67.

*either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation.*²

Post-structuralist criticism of literature contributes to the idea that apparently unified concepts such as literary texts and the ‘self’ are in fact fragmented, selfdivided and centreless; therefore the idea of stable ‘fixed truths’, in relation to these concepts, is deconstructed.. It follows that autobiography can no longer be viewed as synonymous with biography and history because it is a destabilising form of writing and knowledge.

Muriel Spark, in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae* and indeed throughout much of her fiction, is concerned with these ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ in respect to literature and the concept of the self. In her essay entitled ‘The Desegregation of Art’ Spark discusses the art and literature of sentiment, arguing that:

*However beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, it has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity.*³

Spark is interested in absolute truths and therefore views sentimental literature as somewhat inauthentic. Novels, in her opinion, are fictions made up of lies from which a kind of truth emerges and in order to reach this truth one must turn to the arts of satire and ridicule because: “Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left”.⁴ For Spark, art and literature should “liberate our minds from the comfortable cells of lofty sentiment... To bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge” and this, for her, can only be achieved through satire, irony and derision.⁵ Throughout Spark’s fiction, she uses these techniques to present existence as essentially fragmented and incoherent, implying that any quest for unity is false.

Many critics have argued that Spark’s conversion to Roman Catholicism and her concept of faith are essential features of her work. Judy Sproston, in her study entitled

2 Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, criticism, practice* (Manchester University Press, 1994), 7.

3 Muriel Spark, “The Desegregation of Art” in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, Joseph Hynes, ed. (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 35.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 36.

The Women of Muriel Spark, notes that Spark “identifies an area in human experience that relates to faith” and this can be seen in her quest for authenticity amongst the essential incoherence of life.⁶ However, too many critics have labelled Spark a ‘Catholic writer’ assuming that there is one fixed set of values that informs her work. Whereas, if one reads her fiction, what becomes apparent is that Spark uses her satire to highlight human fallibility and punctuate the mundane without presenting one singular omniscient judgement. Sproxton, also notes that many of the characters in Spark’s work have a “misplaced confidence in a single selfish viewpoint and mistakenly assert themselves as the source of power and their own viewpoint as a criterion of truth” and that there are also characters who “have a profound need to acknowledge a truth beyond themselves and who strive to come to terms with the essential inadequacy of a human perspective”.⁷ With this in mind, it is interesting to note that when Spark becomes the subject (character) in her autobiography she calls on this idea from her fiction and addresses the idea of a constructed self, attacking authors’ claims to omniscience and authentic voice. Curriculum Vitae implicitly questions the function of autobiography, Spark is aware that unreliability and the question of intention are already ingrained in the genre and she deliberately sets out to parody and destabilise the structure of autobiography.

In her introduction, Spark purports to write a corrective to put right the erroneous accounts of her life that have been written, she explains that:

*Lies are like fleas hopping from here to there, sucking the blood of the intellect. In my case, the truth is often less flattering, less romantic, but often more interesting than the false story.*⁸

Unlike in her fiction, Spark is explicitly admitted into the text and she is aware that this operates as a principle of uncertainty. Here, Spark knows that the reader expects ‘sentimental’ information and psychological insight about her life because now the author is identical with the autobiographical subject. However, she is aware that the author still remains outside the world represented in the text because, as Bakhtin suggests:

6 Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1992), 154.

7 *Ibid.*, 145.

8 Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (Penguin, 1993), 11.

If I tell (orally or in writing) an event that I have just lived, in so far as I am telling (orally or in writing) this event, I find myself already outside of the time space in which the event occurred. To identify oneself absolutely with oneself, to identify one's 'I' with the 'I' that I tell is as impossible to lift oneself up by one's hair...⁹

Spark understands that a continuous, transparent account of the self is not possible and therefore, deliberately avoids any deliberations of self exploration because she regards these as the “false and erroneous statements” referred to in her introduction. This is made more apparent when Spark proclaims: “I resolved, all those years ago, to write an autobiography which would help to explain, to myself and others: Who am I?”¹⁰ This statement, when read in relation to the rest of the novel, seems ironic; Spark purports to explain ‘Who Am I’, yet does so in a detached and evasive fashion with no explicit insight into her character, even the awkward wording of the phrase “Who Am I” suggests this is not going to be a straight forward account. Martin McQuillan, when discussing Curriculum Vitae, states that it is “the least autobiographical of the fragments, and the fictional story is the most successful exploration of the self”.¹¹ In her fiction Spark is able to embody the omniscient voice and construct characters because she is aware that fiction is made up of lies. In her autobiography, however, she holds back, refusing to judge and make an absolute pattern of her life.

The first chapter is full of over-fussy realism, with special focus and long detailed descriptions of the bread, butter and tea in her youth. This is an extension of Spark’s satire: she is parodying autobiography and human interest in inconsequential details. This is further compounded, when she refuses to present events in a continuous narrative avoiding falsely ‘unifying’ her experience. Instead, Spark joins events and people together simply because of her own random experience, not because of any contrived cause and effect. For example, one of her sub-headings in chapter one is entitled ‘Mrs Rule, Fish Jean and The Kaiser’, this grouping together of random memories emphasises Spark’s opinion that causality and linear time are a human mechanism for ordering things in a mundane fashion.¹² Spark purports to write a

9 Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 52.

10 Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 12.

11 Martin McQuillan in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 89.

12 Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 25.

factual autobiography and states that she will write “nothing which cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses; I have not relied on my memory alone, vivid though it is”.¹³ However, her continuous overemphasis on memory throughout the work serves to call her reliability into question. For example, Spark, when talking about her early childhood, states that her memory “occurs in bright flashes, illuminating every detail of the scene”.¹⁴ She is aware that memory is unreliable so satirises authors’ claims to self-awareness and omniscience in autobiographical writing. Spark extends this satire by presenting the facts of her life as befits a Curriculum Vitae: with economical unadorned prose and factual evidence; seemingly undermining the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than ‘fact’. However, this is yet another of Spark’s devices to overturn the conventions of autobiography: she infiltrates the genre in order to show its essential faults and to highlight the impossibility of an authentic voice in regards to the self.

Throughout Curriculum Vitae, Spark seeks to free the text from authorial omniscience by only presenting the reader with information that can be literary verifiable or corroborated by friends and family. Her mistrust of life narratives and dislike of authors’ attempts to portray their history and existence as unified can be seen in the way she relates her own autobiography. Spark withholds information from the reader, relating the facts of her experience without much emotion or personal comment with many seemingly crucial moments of her life described in a few sentences or through her friends’ comments. For example, when writing about a family friend called Mrs Rule, Spark relates her death to the reader in one short sentence: “Charlotte Rule died after their return to the United States” then proceeds to dedicate the next two sentences to the irrelevant details of popcorn making.¹⁵ This seemingly cold treatment of her death is in fact Spark’s way of calling the reader to take the different fragments of her autobiography and decide for themselves what is important. Spark satirises people’s interest in the trivial in concentrating on apparently inconsequential details. In her essay ‘The Desegregation of Art’, Spark writes:

I would like to see in all forms of art and letters [...] a less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong. I would

13 Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

14 *Ibid.*, 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 26.

*like to see less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts.*¹⁶

Spark regards self-conscious emotion and feelings in art as vulgar and a mode of self-justification. Her satirical technique causes the reader to question the text and take an active part in interpretation.

The post-structuralist critic Roland Barthes in his 'Death of the Author' asserts the independence of the literary text from the author's intention:

*The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.*¹⁷

Here Barthes places the role of the 'author' on the reader, in that the reader must 'read the text against itself', looking for discontinuities in the text instead of unity. Jacques Derrida, another key post-structuralist critic, also takes up this concept in his lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'. Derrida poses a challenge to the idea that words have universal truths and that an inherent meaning is possible. For Derrida, the meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting and ambiguous; it is a characteristic of language to operate in subtle and often contradictory way so that certainty is elusive. Spark is aware that language can be distorting and sincerity is impossible to establish. She, therefore, refuses to build up sensuous physical details; instead using the written word economically but poetically. Spark presents her novel as objective evidence about her life and experiences avoiding, as she has written in her earlier novel *Loitering with Intent* (1981), the three vices of autobiography: "One of them was nostalgia, another was paranoia, a third was a transparent craving...to appear likeable".¹⁸ For Spark, as with Barthes, the text's unity does not lie in its origin, she does not wish to present the reader with a final judgement and make connections which do not exist.

16 Spark, *Desegregation of Art*, 35.

17 Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author: Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 148.

18 Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1981), 31.

Spark's detached style in *Curriculum Vitae* can seem like she is portraying events that would seem to warrant more attention in a seemingly cold manner. However, one must not confuse her writing with authorial attitude, Leon Litvack, in his article 'We all have something to hide', argues that it has always been difficult for readers to understand Spark's detachment and evasiveness; yet:

*Her technique is, perhaps, more enlightening and acceptable in our post-modern and post-colonial world, with its abrogation of constraining power and appropriation of language and writing for new distinctive uses.*¹⁹

Litvack examines what he describes as Spark's "coherent religious vision" and argues that she uses religion to destabilise structures and to force readers to consider the seemingly decentred, pluralistic nature of society rather than to moralise or to preach.²⁰ Spark, in an essay entitled 'My Conversion', discusses her faith and writes: "the Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart. [...] It's something to measure from".²¹

If one looks at *Curriculum Vitae* in this context it could be argued that Catholicism provided the norm for her work as a satirist. St. Augustine described sin as a turning away from God towards the self and this is exactly what Spark strives to avoid in her autobiography. She dislikes the idea that through biography or autobiography one feels they can control and unify their own, or someone else's life. To write a conventional autobiography would be the sin of self-interest; for Spark, confessions or justifications of the self are purely subjective; it is religion and faith which provide objective truth. For example, in chapter four of *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark only dedicates half a page to how she dealt with her violent husband. She does not want to induce pity in the reader with an emotional account of her experience so she economically presents the situation then moves on. This is also true when she writes about the death of her friend Nita. Spark informs the reader that she was shot by her husband and then goes on to write: "This was the factual origin of my short story 'Bang-Bang You're Dead'".²² Throughout her autobiography, Spark continually makes

19 Leon Litvack, "'We all have something to hide': Muriel Spark, *Autobiography*, and the Influence of Newman on the Career of a Novelist", *Durham University Journal* 55:2 (1994), 281-9, 287.

20 *Ibid.*, 287.

21 Muriel Spark, "My Conversion", *Twentieth Century* 170 (Autumn, 1961), 60.

22 Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 34

reference to the motivations behind her fiction, alluding to the fact that the events of her life are somewhat like fiction in that author, narrator and protagonist can never be fully united and, therefore, she cannot present an accurate account. It is in her fiction that Spark is able to construct various subjective stances in order to present both the true and fictive fragments of her life.

Many critics have undermined the force field between an author's writing and their life. For example, Nietzsche, in his autobiography *Ecce Homo*, writes: "I am one thing, my writings are another", suggesting that that what matters is the personality of the philosophies and words, not the person himself.²³ When the reader is presented with a seemingly fragmented text they are demanded to take part in its unification. Spark, in her fiction, is able to embody the omniscient voice and moralise, not to preach or make judgements but to "liberate our minds from the comfortable cells of lofty sentiment" and demand that the reader participates within the text. However, in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark presents the written account of her life as an immediate and unquestionable reality making it difficult for the reader to question her unreliability. Spark believes that it is impossible to reach self-awareness in autobiography because the self is essentially fragmented. This idea is taken up in the novel *Zeno's Conscience* by Italo Svevo which is presented as a fictive autobiography. Zeno's quest for self-awareness manifests itself in his desire for health, however this self-awareness is unobtainable for him and is illustrated when he thinks of the numerous muscles that make up his walk:

*I reacted with a start, and my thoughts immediately rushed to my legs, to seek this monstrous machinery. I believe I found it. Naturally I didn't identify the fifty-four moving parts, but rather an enormous complication went to pieces the moment I intruded my attention upon it.*²⁴

When Zeno consciously thinks of his muscular functions they become 'self-conscious' and he cannot keep them functioning correctly, this is also true with respect to his quest for self-awareness: when his thoughts and actions become self-conscious to him they manifest themselves in bodily sickness. This metaphor illustrates the impossibility of authentically writing about the self. There is always a gap between the

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (London: Penguin, 2004), 39.

24 Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 105.

narrating voice and the subject. Any attempt to unify the two and self-consciously analyse one's experiences results in false justifications and constructions of the self.

Throughout *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark implicitly questions the function of autobiography; she is aware that unreliability inhabits both fiction and autobiography and, therefore, refuses to attribute to it any absolute truths. Spark, in an interview recorded in 1998, said of her autobiography: "I decided to stop at the point where I started writing novels because in a sense they tell their own story".²⁵ In her fiction she implicates her own art in the act of lying and is able to portray different subjective ideas, whereas in her autobiography, she satirises its claims to omniscience.

25 Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark" in *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Palgrave, 2002), 229.

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