

Desegregated Art by Muriel Spark

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Muriel Spark's *Hothouse by the East River* (1973) and *Not to Disturb* (1971)¹ are a new kind of fiction for her: surrealistic comedy. Unlike her earlier novels, which only incorporate the seemingly incredible, these recent books are permeated by impossibilities. Reason cannot explain away the cast of three-dimensional spectres in *The Hothouse*, nor common sense locate the gothic castle in the air of *Not to Disturb*, whereas they could account for Caroline Rose's voices in Spark's 1957 *Comforters* (auditory hallucinations) or January's island in Spark's 1958 *Robinson* (nervous breakdown). Even the mysterious caller of her 1959 *Memento Mori*, presumably Death, is never more than a background sound and may be just a malicious prankster. In her seventies fiction, Spark systematically destroys the simple credibility of her tales in order to nudge us out of the illusion that we are experiencing life and into reflection about it, in order to educate our moral and esthetic sensibilities. She rigorously eschews the pathetic for the satiric and prevents the sense of involvement with life from ever wholly taking over because, as she insists in her 1970 address to the American National Institute of Arts and Letters, these absurd times do not need an art of vicarious experiences. While the "segregated" activity of mimesis is gratifying us by cheating us into the illusion of actual involvement with life, it is also inuring us to evil and suffering and making us complacent about fulfilling our moral responsibilities. She wants a desegregated art that can teach us to recognize and mock the ridiculousness of reality today.²

In *The Hothouse*, a mixture of realistic detail and incredible situation leads us through stages of diminishing credibility to the revelation that the eccentric characters of a tale set in 1970ish New York City died in 1944. The fictional technique (as in *Not to Disturb* too) is effectively cinematic. The narrator plays the camera which records appearances but cannot verbally interpret them; there are abrupt cuts without transition; sudden, meaningful juxtapositions; entries into the midst of scenes already underway. With the camera's freedom, the narrator darts back and forth across present (about five years) and past, leaving us to arrange the events chronologically and puzzle out their relationships.

In the past, entirely realistic flashbacks to 1944 distributed throughout the book, Paul Hazlett, the principal focus of narration, his fiancée Elsa, a friend, Poppy Xavier, and Miles Bunting (possibly Elsa's lover) worked at a top-secret intelligence compound in England, disseminating propaganda to the Germans (as did Spark herself). Elsa, to Paul's secret horror and sense of shame, was accused of having slept with a collaborating P.O.W., Helmut Kiel, before he was returned to the German side. In the present, the self-pitying and self-deluded Paul accuses his unconventional wife Elsa of schizophrenia, but himself seems paranoid. Elsa constantly sits by the east window of their luxurious fourteenth-floor Manhattan apartment, communing with a Nothing out there over the East River; besides, her shadow does not take its direction from visible light sources. Worse, she taunts Paul with the news that Kiel, who is supposed to have died in prison because Paul exposed him as an S.S. man, is a shoe salesman in New York; Paul is certain Kiel has come to murder him. Elsa's psychiatrist, who also discovers her aberrant shadow, undertakes field research by becoming the Hazletts' butler; the Hazlett son

Pierre is planning to produce a geriatric *Peter Pan* with a cast in its sixties (Spark's succinct estimate of maturity in our times); Poppy raises sheep and silkworms on her Long Island estate, taking the sheep to her bed and the worms to her bosom to warm them. In the torrid Hazlett apartment, they hatch all over her. The strained credibility of the present collapses entirely only after Elsa has fled with Keil and returned to wreck the opening performance of *Peter Pan* (with Miles Bunting as Peter) by throwing overripe tomatoes at the cast. To punish her, Paul publicizes her as the family skeleton: she died; he resurrected her, long ago. On the next night, the narrator observes that the entire compound group, not just Elsa, perished in a rocket attack. At dawn, after a frantic last night on the town attempting to escape the other ghosts in encounters progressively more bizarre, Paul finally capitulates to Elsa's longing for her grave. When they return home to find their building partly demolished—like his conceptions, "the upper stories are already gone and the lower part is a shell" (p. 167)—both turn graveward.

Theme is strong amidst the nonsense. The truth of the satiric parable is that the present is always a consequence of the person and his past. In Spark's Catholic cosmos, our life is neither our own nor given us by God to be used for selfish or hostile ends; but our will is free. Fate allows Paul's stubborn refusal of death, only to grant him a death-in-life in which, captive to hostile resentments, delusions, and fears just as in the past, he lives on in desperate anxiety and jealousy, still not perfecting his soul. The book's ironic epigraph—"If it were only true that all's well that ends well, if only it were true"—functions equally well as obsessive Paul's epitaph, for now and forever. Paul has "set the whole edifice soaring" with his "terrible and jealous dreams" (p. 113) in his unending fury over Elsa's presumed affair with Kiel, a wartime secret he foolishly thought he could keep from Elsa, but which she forced him to reveal. *Kiel* is a near-homonym for Paul's impulse to *kill*, one of the phonic jokes Spark delights in (cf. the Seton-Satan of her 1967 *Bachelors*). The versatile "hothouse" not only designates the greatly overheated apartment where Paul and Elsa bait each other—their private little hell with a view—but also signifies Paul's too febrile brain, as a ludicrous madhouse scene enacted there makes clear. Elsa's paranormal shadow which "falls the way it wants" (p. 74)—like Paul and Elsa—proclaims her independence of Paul's "original conception" of her (p. 129). An ingrate raised from rags and shroud to fabulous riches, fair lady Elsa-Eliza has different notions from egotistical Paul-Pygmalion, who thinks we may remake someone in our own image for our private ends.

For *The Hothouse*, as for its geriatric *Peter Pan*, "all the novelty of interpretation is in the cast. Nothing else is changed" (p. 109). Spark uses a spectral cast and scenes from the lives of the dead—"You would think they were alive. . . . One can't tell the difference" (p. 162)—to expose how the living are dead, so that maybe they will amend their ways and effect a better future. Making deadly the one life they have, wasting their freedom to change and perfect themselves, not only are her New Yorkers (modern everymen) compulsion-ridden like Paul; they also pursue emotional, sensation-charged, and self-indulgent lives. Her setting is the land of unreason and excess; her "hothouse by the East River" is also the giddy hell of "fractional Manhattan" (p. 83), without intelligent control or purpose, where "Sick is interesting. Sick is real" (p. 109)—or where, " 'Be reasonable,' he says, and the sound of a police siren wails up First Avenue" (p. 88). Here thrive the "Personality Cult Club" (p. 160) and money-hungry psychiatrists whose feeble intellects reduce all experience willy-nilly to the limited categories of their science. Spark, whose

Catholicism still furnishes her "something to work on as a satirist,"³ objects less to saturnalian excesses and intellectual stupidities, however, than to an absence of love. She can say it with impressive economy. During the Hazletts' last fling, when their cabbie has suddenly, inexplicably said:

"We should drop the atom bomb on 'em":

"Every time," says Paul, agreeably.

They alight at a discotheque called The Sensual Experience, the taxi with its mumbling driver moves on. A dim figure awaits them in the doorway with knife in his hand.

"You can't kill us," says Paul. "We're dead already." (p. 160)

Spark deplores a spiritually dead world, menacingly alive everywhere.

The grotesque fable *Not to Disturb* is set in a modern baronial chateau in Switzerland. Here during one stormy night, unusually articulate servants wait for their master, mistress, and a secretary-lover to die in the library, where the trio have sequestered themselves with strict orders not to be disturbed. So certain are the servants that Baron Klopstock will shoot the others and then himself that, led by the enterprising butler Lister—who strictly forbids anyone to disturb the trio—they have sold the sensational Klopstock story in advance to magazines and film-makers. Clovis the cook has written a scenario with parts in it for the staff. When the feeble-minded Klopstock in the attic unexpectedly proves legal heir to the estate, Lister quickly snatches him away from his designing outsider of a nurse to marry him off to the pregnant and promiscuous housemaid Heloise; the cretin delightedly rapes her during the ceremony. Otherwise, all goes as planned, and the comedy comes to its happy close with the servants finally abed. "By noon they will be covered in the profound sleep of those who have kept faithful vigil all night" (p. 159).

This is cold comedy indeed but amusing and easy to read as a new version of the oldest fictional props and ploys—remote, stormbound castle with family madman; all-knowing, resourceful butler; nick-of-time marriage to the rightful heir; and so on. But there is a moral to the tale and a reason for Spark's peppering it with literary quotations and allusions. (Even the baron's surname is a literary borrowing, from the distinguished German epic poet, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock; his secretary's name comes from Jean Passerat, patternmaker for French vilanelles; and Lister's from a minor English novelist.) *Not to Disturb* is a parable about the responsibility of the artist and of his public; it asks novel readers and film watchers to reflect both on the modern artist's questionable ways and their own debased tastes in story-illusions and tellers.

The tale curiously exposes its ending from the start by proceeding as if the library deaths were history: says Lister, "Today we speak of facts. . . . To all intents and purposes they're already dead although as a matter of banal fact, the night's business has still to accomplish itself" (pp. 5, 17). But the *not* banal business is murder and suicide, accomplished by persons because Lister, intent upon having his grisly story turn out as projected, refuses to disturb. He should have disturbed. Lister and his alter egos among the staff represent fictionists, creators of illusions capable of influencing public attitudes. And therefore, as Spark says it, they are servants with a responsibility to their masters to disturb them. Even if Lister pretends to the mantle of Henry James, Spark's eye is not just on the novelist. Lister's staff, aside from scenarist Clovis, includes Mr. Samuel, the cameraman, and Mr. McGuire, the soundtrack man with his ubiquitous tape recorder, who busily capture tonight's events

for future commercial and publicity uses. Spark's eye is also on the filmmaker. With a prepared scenario, he knows the end of a fable in advance, though the working out of details is subject to the improvisations of a clever director. And when unforeseen events arise, "Clovis amends his script" (p. 111). To put it another way, the scenario given, all that remains is for the shooting to take place—the situation in this novel. The book itself, moreover, is written like a scenario, entirely in present tense, with almost no narrator's commentary and no penetration at all of characters' minds, and has a more pronouncedly cinematic quality than *The Hothouse*. (Spark did write the script for the film version of her 1960 *Driver's Seat*.) An emphasis on filmmaking focuses the satire on contemporary story art in particular.

Spark objects to a contemporary gothic taste for violence, sensationalism, and coldheartedness in story, which mirror and encourage the excesses and inhumanity too prominent already in our world. She questions not only the purveyors, but the buyers of such storytelling, by the way she arranges her fiction to manipulate reactions. With Lister's perspective as the only norm—"They were good for a purpose as long as they lasted. . . . As paper cups are suitable for occasions, you use them and throw them away" (p. 50)—we are delighted that the servants' plans succeed so smoothly. We care no more about the three deaths in the library than about those of the secretary's friends, a transvestite and a masseuse fortuitously dispatched by a bolt of lightning as they wait outside in the storm. We are hugely amused by the here-we-go-again of a call to the late baron's brother in Rio which cannot connect because brother and friends are sequestered in the library and not to be disturbed. Conditioned by modern life and arts to incredible impersonality, we adopt Lister's callous attitude readily; it is familiar enough to be acceptable. It should not be, says Spark.

Satirizing the way illusions in story arts operate these days, she holds up certain obvious excesses to ridicule, like a reliance on sexual aberration, nudity, and crudity to make a story appealingly "real." Such ostensible openness to life may just as well represent a refusal to inspect it closely at all, in preference for titillating fantasies which impersonally delight without disturbing at all. But here, just as in *The Hothouse*, Spark offers more than an attack on excesses. A more serious way of depersonalizing art than saturating it with stimuli is taking the esthetic stance: anything for the sake of art. The too pure artist plays Lister's dangerous game: insisting that art functions on a plane where ordinary responses do not pertain—"Does a flame feel pain?" (p. 73)—so that he may put anything before us. Lister has a clear sense of his moral relationship to the library events, but that is irrelevant to his art:

Clovis says, "We've got nothing to hide. We're innocent."

"Well, we are crimeless," Lister says. "To continue with the plans . . ."
(p. 106).

Artist Lister, who envisions only "more chaos effectively to organise" (p. 72), neither elicits the moral truths in events nor cares to impose any on them. Spark herself wants more from the artist today than the moral casualness of virtuoso organization or polished technique. Modernist in her own technique, she is a traditionalist in her values.

Not to Disturb, even truer to her credo of desegregated art than *The Hothouse*, observes her strictures against allowing sentimental identification with the sufferer or vicarious uplift through art, by not offering us a single rounded character about whom we could care. The consequences are unfortunate. Elsa and Paul of *The Hothouse*, for all their extravagances of manner and

behavior, are believably real. We feel them essentially, ridiculously human, and recognize their world as only a more fanciful version of ours. The combination of actuality, exaggeration, and incredibility succeeds in producing an affective—and disturbing—novel. In *Not to Disturb*, conversely, the consistent unreality of the fictional illusion precludes the modicum of sympathy that satire needs to evoke. Following an intellectual game with amusement at the adroit manipulations, we care no more about Lister's glacial poise than about the needless deaths because neither he nor anyone else seems real. Furthermore, there are likely to be readers for whom Spark's ironic intentions, so obliquely presented in *Not to Disturb*, will misfire. What seems to the satirist so exaggerated in depiction as to proclaim itself but foolishness for thinking upon, to some folk in these befuddled times may seem so normal as to escape notice at all. One way or another, we are unlikely to have our tastes or habits reformed by *Not to Disturb*. Duplicating life just enough to draw us into a created illusion, while preventing our entire belief; and regretting its characters' failings while it attacks them, the less desegregated *Hothouse by the East River* will probably convey more truth to more readers in the end.

NOTES

¹All references, given parenthetically above, will be to the Macmillan of London first editions (*Hothouse*, 1973; *Not to Disturb*, 1971).

²"The Desegregation of Art," May 26, 1970. In *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters*, 2nd series, no. 21 (New York: Spiral Press, 1971), pp. 21-27.

³"My Conversion," *Twentieth Century*, CLXX (Aut. 1961), 60.