

## BOOK REVIEWS

Velma Bourgeois Richmond

*MURIEL SPARK*

New York: Unger, 1985. Pp. X + 198

Reviewed by Irving Malin

Although I would expect a brief study of Muriel Spark to be severely limited and critically "unfair," I am pleasantly surprised by Richmond's book. She offers clear summaries; obscure references I have not seen before; suggestive ways of approaching the great number of novels (and stories and poems). Richmond is, strongly speaking, a careful, shrewd critic who is not hampered by her space limitations. She offers more than the usual guide.

I offer some random examples of Richmond's sharp, brisk readings; her prose, like Spark's, allows us to see things clearly and forthrightly. I offer an example from Chapter Five on the "poems, plays, and stories." Richmond quotes part of the following poem: "Who is Everyman, what is he/That he should stand in lieu of a poem. What is truth true of?/And what good's a God's eye-view of/Anyone to anyone/But God?" (p. 58). Richmond points out firstly that in order to understand the creative design, the artistic unity of Spark's work, we must know *all* of her writing. She also explicates these lines—as well as the poem's title "Against the Transcendentalists"—to demonstrate that poetry (all art) is insufficient. Spark, we are informed, "identifies poetry as the rarest commodity, but she rejects the romantic excesses often associated with it" (p. 59). Richmond argues here and throughout the book that we must be attentive to Spark's devotions. Spark, we are told, deliberately uses "popular" modes of fiction—the thriller, the ghost story—to gain our attention, to grip us; but she moves beyond conventional genres—often so quickly we do not know that she is sailing past us—to explore the relationships of art and religion.

Perhaps Richmond should slow down to explore the idea (and image) of deceptive reflection so that we can see how strongly it recurs in many of the works. I have argued elsewhere that Spark is a master of deception. Her later novels underline this label because they suggest that we can never be sure whether or not a character is "true" or malicious; whether the artist is confidence man or would-be-saint. Spark's shortest novels are, I think, her most profound ones because they intensify her various thematic and metaphorical concerns. Although Richmond doesn't agree on this point, she does at least do justice to such works as *The Public Image* and *The Abbess of Crewe* which have never received the close religious readings they deserve. I offer one example of Richmond's concise, brilliant explications. She quotes the final paragraph of *The Public Image*; she bravely (and rightly) calls it a paragraph as "finely written as any in modern fiction" (p. 109). But she doesn't stop here. She looks at each phrase, recognizing the verbal echoes, the plays on words.

Richmond cannot, of course, delve into the philosophical turnings of Spark; she lacks the format—she could, for example, explore the religious voice of her subject with that of Flannery O'Connor's or Caroline Gordon's—to "loiter" with complex intent. I have no doubt, however, that her guidebook will endure as more than mere commercial work. Richmond performs a valuable, necessary, striking service—she compels us to return to Spark's unjustly neglected, "slim" masterpieces. I congratulate her for this critical achievement, an achievement which is startling and lasting.