



One of the many delights of a Muriel Spark novel is the way in which the ground shifts so delicately under the reader's feet. *Memento Mori* begins as a mystery: who is victimising elderly people by making anonymous phone calls suggesting that they remember they must die? A detective is consulted, and duly tries to identify the culprit; or culprits, as there is little consensus on precisely what kind of voice is at the end of the line. In a sense the novel fulfils the criteria of a whodunit, but the answer to the mystery of the phone calls turns out to be the most obvious, if least expected one. As another of Spark's characters, the Abbess of Crewe, states, scenarios, need not be plausible, only hypnotic, like all good art. Reading the novel, we might think of the memento mori gravestones of the seventeenth century, and their elegantly carved reminders that death does not care how rich, celebrated or healthy we are. He or she will come for us all one day, and so we ought to recognise that the wormy clay awaits. In an interview to mark the publication of the book in 1959, Spark said: The prospect of death is what gives life the whole of its piquancy. Life would be so much more pointless if there were no feeling that it must end.

Her first lesson in mortality came early. When Spark was around nine years old, her grandmother Adelaide came to live in Edinburgh and was installed in Spark's own bedroom. Adelaide's past was somewhat mysterious, but she was feisty and fun. A former suffragette and an excellent storyteller, she styled herself as a Gentile Jewess, an identity Spark would later claim, as well as using it in the title of one of her most famous short stories. After a couple of years, two strokes, and a cerebral haemorrhage, Adelaide required care. The young Muriel helped provide it, realising in the process how vulnerable old people can be, as well as how fascinating she found both Adelaide's aphasic peregrinations of memory and language and the implication that the Grim Reaper might be just around the corner. In her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark notes that my experiences in minding and watching my grandmother formed a starting-point for my future novel, *Memento Mori*, in which the characters are all elderly people. John

Masefield once told her that all experience is good for an artist, and she was always refreshingly pragmatic about the matter of life offering up material. Little surprise that readers tend to find particular fictions, *The Gentile Jewesses* amongst them, more amenable to an autobiographical reading than the ostensible autobiography.

A novel peopled by well-to-do elderly folk and set in the 1950s cannot help but have a veneer of cosiness. Many of Spark's novels written or set in this period do, whether she is writing about girls of slender means, genteel proponents of autobiography, plump publishing assistants, or eccentric old ladies and their one-time companion maids. Veneer it is though, and what lies under the grain in *Memento Mori* pulls no punches. Jean Taylor, former maid to the once-famous novelist Charmian Colston (née Piper) and now incarcerated with eleven other (aged people, female) in the Maud Long Medical Ward, says to a visitor that Being over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and dying as on a battlefield.

Few members of the coterie of characters centring on Jean and eighty-five-year-old Charmian are so clear-sighted. The ability to acknowledge one's own mortality without dismay is reserved for those who are Catholic; both women are, like Spark herself, converts. When, at the beginning of the novel, Charmian's eighty-seven-year-old husband Godfrey hears that his sister Lettie has once more been victimised by the anonymous caller exhorting her to *Remember you must die*, he surmises: He must be a maniac. Dame Lettie herself considers it a great pity that flogging has been abolished. Godfrey is much concerned with faculties and their retention, and scornful of his wife's erratically failing memory. Always perfectly sensible when discussing her books, Charmian retains her novelist's insight. She realises that her dementia has been the excuse Godfrey needed to take his revenge: It was an instinctive reaction to the years of being a talented, celebrated woman's husband, knowing himself to be reaping continually in her a harvest which he had not sown. As interest in her novels revives, Charmian's brain sharpens and her physical health improves. Godfrey, after all, was not a clever man, she muses, while plotting her escape from her husband and his bullying new housekeeper, Mrs Pettigrew, who wish to exert upon her a firm hand. Trust and betrayal are key themes here, as they remain in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, published just two years later.

Spark's novels often feature a character who is a writer or publisher, somebody

who seems to occupy a Spark-shaped space in the text. Charmian is a much more veiled example than, say, Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent*, but retrospective autobiographical readings do present themselves: the jealous lover, the disappointing son. (Although, at the time of writing, she remained friendly with her ex-lover Derek Stanford, and was immensely proud of her son Robin.) More pertinent is Charmian's belief that the art of fiction is very like the practice of deception, an idea that Spark circled around throughout her writing life. In these current days of insisting that the truth be found in art, it is interesting to read a portrait of an author firm in her belief that fiction is not in itself true, but offers instead an image of the truth. Real life is different. In real life, for Charmian, and perhaps for Spark too, Everything is in the Providence of God.

Whereas we're told that many of Charmian's novels consisted of people saying *touché* to each other, Spark is known for the sharpness of her style. The narrator of *Memento Mori* is rovingly omniscient, and wonderfully tough, a voice capable of observing Godfrey Colston standing there arms dangling and legs apart, like a stage rustic as well as noting the way a visitor to Jean Taylor looks carefully at her eyes to determine a continuing intelligence amongst the ruins. Old age is full of indignities, and Spark's characters are spared none of them. Jean Taylor, a woman practised in restraint, embraces the desolate humiliation of the microcosm that is the Maud Long Ward as God's will. She did not hesitate, on one occasion when the nurse was dilatory, to wet the bed as the other grannies did so frequently. The true horror to be feared is loss of control, and the loss of one's identity that accompanies it. For the poet Guy Leet, this lies in the prospect of the physical incapacity to write. Looking reproachfully at his hands, he decides they might be good for perhaps another year in spite of the twisted fingers. How primitive, Guy thought, life becomes in old age, when one may be surrounded by familiar comforts and yet more vulnerable to the action of nature than any young explorer at the Pole. The triumph of the writing is that Spark creates just enough space (and no more) for the dawning of empathy. The physical journey of Old age creates the young of

identified or found wanting. If circumstances dictate, the specimen may then be discarded, like poor Mary McGregor in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, who would die running back and forth along the corridors in a hotel fire. Sometimes Spark's protagonists survive their novels and sometimes they don't. It is giving little away to say that the body count in *Memento Mori* is high.

A novel about ageing and dying might be rather bleak, but *Memento Mori* sparkles with a constant, satisfying humour. There is a farcical funeral, the internecine fighting of the literati is recognisable and hilarious, and the black humour as dark as it comes. Jean Taylor recalls being in her fifties, and taking a sudden turn into the woods while walking with her ex-lover Alec Warner. She reassures herself with the thought: Were they not usually young women who were strangled in woods by sexual maniacs? On realising that the path is in fact an innocent shortcut, and he was not contemplating murder with indecent assault, Jean relaxes. How things do, she thought, come and go through a woman's mind. Uncomfortable tangles of sex and violence are a Spark trademark, and we can see in this a foreshadowing of Lise's fate in *The Driver's Seat*. The scene between Jean and Alec points to more fundamental concerns though. He takes Jean walking to pose one of the biggest questions to be grappled with: Do you think, Jean, that other people exist? The evidence Jean offers fits perfectly with the novel's title and themes. On coming to a graveyard, she says, Why bother to bury people if they don't exist?

Alec's existential considerations develop into a fervent amateur gerontology. As we might expect, his attempts to study old age into submission come to naught. A fire destroys his meticulous research, and although he himself is spared, the only comfort he is left with is to follow Cardinal Newman's suggestion and associate himself with the illnesses and decline of his friends (as opposed to the great Confessor Saints): What were they sick, what did they die of? The novel's ending is masterful, exemplifying one of the greatest literary tricks that Spark employs: the ability to write in a way that can be called postmodern, or experimental, while never losing sight of the humanity at the core of the work. Within two brief paragraphs, our cast is reduced to a list of its ailments, its flesh sublimated into the wormy clay, and we are offered a striking and poignant metaphysical note on which to meditate as we close the book. The characters may have failed, but it is right that we should exercise our compassion towards them. *Memento Mori* is one of Spark's best novels precisely because of how much is

held in perfect balance: play and seriousness, entertainment and challenge, readable plot and postmodern derailment.

When the novel first appeared, it marked a pivotal point in Spark's career. Her admirers Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh loved it. It remained Greene's favourite of all her novels, and Waugh thought it singularly gruesome. Tremendous critical success followed, in the UK at least (the US took slightly longer to warm to her talents). V.S. Naipaul reviewed it as brilliant, startling and original. Not bad for a work that Macmillan refused to contract until the manuscript was complete, and a vindication of Spark's insistence that she would not welcome editorial input. She was forty-one years old, and at last earning enough from her writing to survive comfortably (and, indeed, to buy herself a diamond ring). She had published three novels within three years, and the advance for her next, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, doubled. It would soon be time to think of matters such as public image, and the ideal conditions for the continued production of art.

Across such a glittering oeuvre as Spark's, *Memento Mori* continues to stand out for the contemporary reader. Its structure and tone are pitch perfect, and it has an uncanny knack for making us laugh while making us think. The two central female characters are wise, loveable and deeply memorable, if that is we are to be allowed to retain our memories. At the same time as being absolutely specific a