‘Unfeeling, Unflinching, and ‘Superbly Uncuddly’: Muriel Spark’s “The Desegregation of Art”’

Author: Joshua Lok

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Unfeeling, Unflinching, and 'Superbly Uncuddly': Muriel Spark's "The Desegregation of Art"

Joshua Lok

Much about Muriel Spark is upsetting. Not least the fact that her writing, whether in style or subject matter, is perennially unclassifiable. Speaking to Janice Galloway in 1999, Spark admits that it is "very difficult to put my work in any genre and under any label––very very difficult ... It bothers people."[1] According to Ruth Whittaker, her writing is "more obviously resistant to the process of critical labelling than many writers because her direction and emphases change considerably in the course of her work."[2] As a result, it has proven a difficult task to assign Spark a place in the literary canon or even to assess her work's overall character. Nevertheless, and perhaps paradoxically, Spark's art exudes aesthetic and ideological certainty. This is evident from the very beginning of her fiction-writing career, which was signalled by her winning the *Observer* short-story competition in 1951 with "The Seraph and the Zambesi." For Derek Stanford, Spark's one-time lover and literary collaborator, that fantastical short story had "nothing tentative about it. Its aim was perfect. Its very certainty upset some people."[3] Evaluating Spark's long career forty years after Stanford, John Lanchester asserts more generally: "There are no bad Spark novels; her consistency is one of the eerie things about her."[4] What has been even more

[1] Galloway, Janice. "The Vital Spark." *Sunday Herald*. July 11, 1999. 6.
[2] Whittaker, Ruth. *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*. London: Macmillan, 1982. 11-12.
[3] Stanford, Derek. *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study*. London: Centaur Press, 1963. 108.
[4] Lanchester, John. Introduction. *The Driver's Seat*. By Muriel Spark. London: Penguin Classics, 2006. xii.

upsetting for critics, however, is Spark's unfeeling bent, which often manifests in her writing as a striking moral and ethical indifference.

The sense of unfeeling in Spark is a rare area of critical consensus, upon which both detractors and admirers converge. Writing in 1973, Patricia Stubbs is of the opinion that Spark should be "castigated" for "her refusal to be committed … for her readiness to abandon all for a jest, for her random satire," and for "the detached attitude she maintains towards her characters."[5] Whereas Stubbs's view is closer to a complaint than constructive criticism, it is one often also held by Spark's admirers who position this unfeeling quality as central to her art. "'Ominous,' indeed, is the adjective at the heart of Mrs Spark's witchcraft," John Updike writes in 1963 of her early novels; the "undercurrents of destruction, cruelty, madness, and––ever more insistently––sexual repression are allowed to run unspoken, welling up here and there, as they do in life, with an unexpectedness that would be comic if we could laugh."[6] Regarding five of Spark's novels around the turn of 1970, a prolific period in which her singularly unfeeling style intensifies, Malcolm Bradbury claims that the "tactics of indifference which give poise to her aesthetic manner transfer themselves through to an appalling moral manner," and refract into "a decidedly strange view of the world and of human potential and the human condition."[7] They attain, Bradbury concludes, to their "status as masterpieces of hard construction, to all appearances indifferent to their human content."[8]

Nowhere does this indifference appear more pronounced than in Spark's treatment of one of the chief areas of human experience traditionally characterised

[5] Stubbs, Patricia. *Writers and their Work: Muriel Spark*. London: F. Mildner & Sons, 1973. 33.
[6] Updike, John. "Between a Wedding and a Funeral." *The New Yorker* 39. 14 September 1963. 192.
[7] Bradbury, Malcolm. "Muriel Spark's Fingernails." *Critical Quarterly* 14.3 (1972): 241.
[8] Bradbury, 245.

by strong or heightened feeling: love. To Ruth Whittaker, Spark's fiction is marked by "a feeling of unease, which is intensified rather than alleviated by seeing how [she] deals with potentially loving relationships." In fact, Whittaker says, "very few people love each other in her novels. Close relationships are more often based on a reluctant mutual dependence brought about by unsought proximity."[9] Spark herself clearly largely agreed. She confirms this impression of her work, as well as its touch of misanthropy, in an interview for the *Partisan Review* in 1985 with Sara Frankel. In response to Frankel's comment that quite "a few reviewers have seen [her] novels as cold and overly intellectual," and that "there are no portraits of successful emotional relationships," Spark says: "I think my work is detached, yes. I don't go in for emotional things much. By intention."[10] Elaborating on this point, Spark continues:

> I don't deal with men and women and love. It's not that I see it as irrelevant––although sometimes it *is* irrelevant––but I don't see that the relationship between men and women is very good these days … And anyway, there are no 'happy' situations––everything is mixed. Nobody is happy for three months on end, it's the human condition. It's not possible.[11]

What is striking here is how Spark seems to consider the particularities of the unfeeling character of her work to be offering an implicit social critique; here, of the fact, especially overlooked in literary expressions, that love is not always relevant and that nobody is always happy. Springing from Spark's unfeeling outlook, then, is a sharpened critical awareness of that which is often easily or unquestioningly

[9] Whittaker, 13.
[10] "An Interview with Muriel Spark." By Sara Frankel. 1985. *Partisan Review* 54.3 (1987): 450.
[11] Ibid., emphasis original.

accepted as true or natural, in art as in life. Fostering sharpened critical awareness is in many ways the distinguishing feature of Spark's works.

This aspect of Spark's personality and work should come as no surprise to us, given her express admiration for the Scottish border ballads, a tradition Spark once claimed as having left an "ineradicable" mark on her work. Speaking in another interview on her formative influences, Sparks says that the "border ballad savagery was what appealed to me … I was very, very, attracted to that."[12] This affinity crystallises for her into a distinct perspective and something of an aesthetic ideal. "A bite, malice: it sharpens every form of art. There has to be some."[13] This statement corroborates many of the critical observations above which, as a whole, suggest that Spark's aesthetic achievement is inseparable from her ostensibly high-handed mercilessness. It is a collective impression that accrues to John Updike's expressive description of Spark's body of work, as one which "linger[s] in the mind as brilliant shards, decisive as a smashed glass is decisive, evidences of unmistakable power rather casually applied."[14]

To further elucidate this decisive nature and its intimate links to remaining unfeeling, or practising an unfeeling art, this article will explore how Spark's unfeeling 'bite' and 'malice' not only aids art in placing a critical lens on reality, but helps an audience to sharpen their own critical focus. Slightly unconventionally, however, this article will take as its focal point not Spark's creative oeuvre but one essay: "The Desegregation of Art." Originally an address Spark made to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1970, in which she advocates for producing 'intelligent' rather than sentimental art, "The Desegregation of Art" serves

[12] "Muriel Spark – b. 1918: Interview." By Jeanne Devoize and Pamela Valette. 1989. *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (2003): 246.
[13] Ibid., 250.
[14] Updike, John. "Topnotch Witcheries." *The New Yorker* 50. 6 January 1975. 76.

both as a critical introduction to Spark and as a ground for metacritical exploration and extrapolation. The essay also helps to position 'unfeeling' not as cruelty or apathy, but as a critically conscious rebuff to the mess of feelings, emotions, and sentiment that so often coalesces into, and is then unquestioningly valorised as, empathy. What should hopefully become clear from even a brief survey of Spark's essay is that her obsession with a particular manner of socially orientated and even politically motivated unfeeling outstrips her interest in being merely gleefully unflinching—taking pleasure in looking society's harsh realities in the face—or unsentimental. Despite being remembered for having claimed to love her characters "most intensely, like a cat loves a bird," Spark is, in fact, urging an intellectual intervention into a cultural landscape dominated by the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, under whose empathetic veneer pernicious realities lie.[15] In all, this paper aims to uncover Spark's chief concern: how an unfeeling art might declutter and disencumber the critical faculties of the mind, especially because such a practice carries, at times obliquely, urgent political implications.

"The Desegregation of Art": Muriel Spark's Sharpened Artform

"I'm sure you all remember the silly old saying 'The pen is mightier than the sword,'" Spark says to her assembled audience in "The Desegregation of Art." "Perhaps when swords were the weapons in use, there was some point in the proverb. Anyway, in our time, the least of our problems is swords."[16] While to the untrained ear a bizarre turn in a defence of the value of literature as art, it is to Spark critics an iconic set of

[15] Stannard, Martin. *Muriel Spark: The Biography*. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009. 129.
[16] Spark, Muriel. "The Desegregation of Art." *The Golden Fleece*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014. 28.

lines that, appearing roughly halfway through the essay, also prove a turning point in what is now regarded as a major landmark in her career and often identified as her artistic manifesto. In keeping with her unfeeling attitude—her rejection of certain unrealistic conceptions and portrayals of love, for instance—Spark states in the essay that "the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however stirring in its depiction of actuality, has to go."[17] Much like the proverb, such art and literature has simply outlived its usefulness. She explains:

> We have in this century a marvellous tradition of socially conscious art. And especially now in the arts of drama and the novel we see and hear everywhere the representation of the victim against the oppressor, we have a literature and an artistic culture, one might almost say a civilisation, of depicted suffering, whether in social life or in family life. We have representations of the victim-oppressor complex, for instance, in the dramatic portrayal of the gross racial injustices of our world, or in the exposure of the tyrannies of family life on the individual. As art this can be badly done, it can be brilliantly done. But I am going to suggest that it isn't achieving its end or illuminating our lives any more, and that a more effective technique can and should be cultivated.[18]

As Spark's precisely chosen vocabulary suggests, the purpose of developing such techniques goes far beyond a mere reform of art itself. Her concern is that an artistic culture so coloured by sentiment and feeling "cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity."[19] Instead of moving an audience to become fully or sincerely involved with or, as she later makes clear, to

[17] Ibid.
[18] Spark, "Desegregation," 27-28.
[19] Ibid., 28.

redress or resist the world's iniquities, such sentimental art rouses "the sympathies and the indignation of a modern audience" only for them to then "feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel."[20] In short, it produces or else induces a lazy and ultimately perfunctory catharsis.

In opposition to this, Spark makes the case for an altogether different approach. "I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule. And I see no other living art form for the future."[21] She expresses her desire "to see in all forms of art and letters, ranging from the most sophisticated and high achievements to the placards that the students carry about the street, a less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong." She would like to see "less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts."[22] It is important to note that the word "intelligence" here is not put forward as value judgement but as a critical approach; not a quality one is born with or expected to have, but a skill one can learn and hone. Spark's use of this word is underlined by her reply to Robert Hosmer's comment, in a 2005 interview, that "satire and ridicule seem misunderstood today––misunderstood by writer and reader alike." Spark suggests instead that "[s]atire and ridicule will always be understood by a more sophisticated mind and it is––I can only say it is a matter of education."[23] Intelligence is within the reach of all attentive readers.

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 29.
[23] "An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark." By Robert E. Hosmer. 2005. *Salmagundi* 146/147 (2005): 155.

Far from elitist, then, Spark's vision for the arts is eminently democratic, as her reference to student protests and, indeed, very title suggest. She begins the essay by stating her overall point that "[l]iterature of all the arts, is the most penetrable into the human life of the world, for the simple reason that words are our common currency."[24] And it is Spark's view that human life shares much in common, too. She argues "that the only effective art of our particular time is the satirical, the harsh and witty, the ironic and derisive. Because we have come to a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd [...] The art of ridicule is an art that everyone can share to some degree, given the world that we have."[25] It is her fundamental belief that bolstering the educative and not merely emotive potential of the arts, to "bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time, and above all to entertain us in the process, has become the special calling of arts and of letters."[26] As Spark plainly states, in a line that refers back to the outdated proverb she deemed in need of renewal: "Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left."[27]

Some of the more specific and idiosyncratic examples Spark offers in her essay further illustrate this point, and the urgency for such a cultural transformation. At one stage, she makes another appeal to her audience:

> We have all seen on the television those documentaries of the 'thirties and of the Second World War, where Hitler and his goose-stepping troops advance in their course of liberating, as they called it, some city, some country or other; we have seen the strutting and posturing of

[24] Spark, "Desegregation," 26.
[25] Ibid., 30.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Spark, "Desegregation," 28.

> Mussolini. It looks like something out of comic opera to us. If the massed populations of those times and in those countries had been moved to break up into helpless laughter at the sight, those tyrants wouldn't have had a chance. And I say we should all be conditioned and educated to regard violence in any form as something to be ruthlessly mocked.[28]

While to a certain extent putting her own art of ridicule to work by characterising fascist military manoeuvres as "something out of comic opera," Spark demonstrates some of the chief dangers of sentimental literature for a society beholden to it: its ability to dim people's critical functions so drastically and collectively that they become incapable of recognising violence even as it postures and struts about them. Beyond a lack of recognition, this incapacity or debilitation, stemming directly from the specific form of empathy encouraged by the arts, facilitates violence.

For Patricia Waugh, Spark "emphatically rejected the literature of empathy and sentiment for an art of ridicule because she recognised that the assumption of empathy, the idea that one can see and feel the world through another's perspective, must always in some sense be a delusion."[29] Such a delusion is anything but innocuous because, Waugh decides, society's collective inability to resist violence too easily becomes its committing violence or, at least, its acquiescing to violence being committed. As "the art of harmonisation" or the purported "ideal harmony of the many in one," empathy "entail[s] a failure in discernment, in listening," since it "function[s] as a consolatory but ultimately communal solipsism that drowns out what it chooses not to hear." But precisely because empathy is "that merging of

[28] Ibid., 28-29.
[29] Waugh, Patricia. "Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularisation, and Psychosis." *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*. Ed. David Herman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 78.

voices whose slippery slope might lead to the eradication of the voice of the other altogether,"[30] that which was passive––society's delusions, its mere inability to recognise violence––becomes, if surreptitiously, active. By so delving into the nature of empathy, Waugh's account here makes explicit what was in "The Desegregation of Art" implicit: empathy dulls society's perceptive functions and fosters an unthinking, herd mentality insensitive to gestures of violence, which in turn allows a totalising effect to take hold, fulfilling Spark's notion that "wherever there is a cult of the victim, such being human nature, there will be an obliging cult of twenty equivalent victimisers."[31]

It is therefore not only impossible to truly empathise, as empathy is a delusion, but it is also immoral to do so, because it breeds violence. This is by no means an overstatement. As Waugh claims elsewhere, the "banality of evil is a bureaucratic or mimetic monologism that cannot hear the voice of the other. It is thoughtlessness, thought as devocalised solipsism."[32] As such, the rampant and unthinking empathy nurtured by sentimental literature must be sacrificed, as Spark calls for in "The Desegregation of Art," not only because of the reasons invoked by that tissue of quotation harkening back to Hannah Arendt, but also because feelings––that which sentimental literature is ever evoking––are by nature thoughtless. Spark suggests that, thus blighted by empathy, the "cult of the victim is the cult of pathos, not tragedy. The art of pathos is pathetic, simply; and it has reached a point of exhaustion, a point where not the subject-matter but the art-form itself is crying to heaven for vengeance."[33] And not just the art-form, but the victims

[30] Waugh, Patricia. "Muriel Spark's 'Informed Air': Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction" *Textual Practice* 32.9 (2018): 1649.
[31] Spark, "Desegregation," 29.
[32] Waugh, "Muriel Spark's 'Informed Air': Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction," 1637.
[33] Ibid., 29.

of that violence, too. Sentimental literature and its cult followers must be made to go, Spark stresses, "by intelligent methods."[34]

Spark in fact appears to have practised what she preaches, in her time working in Intelligence––or black propaganda, as she prefers to call it––during WWII. Posted "to the headquarters of the unit at Woburn Abbey," Spark worked "under Sefton Delmer, in conditions of the utmost secrecy." Derek Stanford details it thus:

> The hush-hush game played by her and her colleagues might have come intact out of one of her novels. Part of her work was the distortion of news, slanted for German consumption, so as to undermine morale. One such report put out by her team was the story that Hitler had had his pants burnt off him when the bomb exploded in the Generals' plot. This item, I feel, had the true Sparkian touch. That evil as abominable as Hitler's should be deflated by means of humour would be a way of thinking natural to her.[35]

Spark went on to fictionalise her wartime experiences in her novels, perhaps most overtly in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), which dramatises her walking German prisoners-of-war in the yard behind Woburn Abbey to feed them cooked-up stories. But Stanford's characterisation of this particular episode deserves more scrutiny. Couched in terms of a game, where stories are made up to deflate abominable evil, this intelligence work is a committed, intellectual effort aimed at undermining German morale; it does not spring from any emotional or empathetic response to the evils of the Nazi regime. Stanford's reading of Spark's exploits in the war––in some ways, her unfeeling art in fledgling state––is prescient: he was

[34] Spark, "Desegregation," 27.
[35] Stanford, 43.

writing in 1963, seven years before Spark gave "The Desegregation of Art" in New York. But it also offers us a clearer understanding of the political implications of her writing. While Spark neither espouses nor repudiates any particular ideology, she maintains the opinion, as expressed in an interview with Martin McQuillan in 1998, that "You can't be non-political, not unless you are really empty-headed," agreeing with McQuillan's observation that "whilst [she] is not interested in Politics, *the political* interests [her] very much."[36]

This is evident from "The Desegregation of Art." Although ostensibly about the state of contemporary art and literature, the essay is galvanised by those inescapably political examples on violence and Hitler and the urgency of resistance. Later in that same interview, McQuillan suggests that the novel is a sort of political vehicle to "effect social change." In reply, Spark expounds on and qualifies her handling of politics:

> I think it just depends on the time and the circumstance, if it does [effect social change]. I think if you set out to do it, that's another type of novel; it's really an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* type novel. You set out to right a wrong. I haven't ever done that. I haven't a message just like that. I would hope that everything I write changes something, opens windows in people's minds, something. I do want to do *that*, to clarify.[37]

The sense of politics in Spark's art is defined, therefore, not by any active political activism or revolutionary message but is, instead, a corollary of the intellectual edge to her art.

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[36] "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark." By Martin McQuillan. November 1998. *Theorising Muriel Spark*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 221., emphasis original.
[37] McQuillan, emphasis original.

Nevertheless, her unfeeling art may have a more specific target. In her address, Spark also suggests how a keen intellectual edge might be weaponized:

> Crude invective can rouse us for a time, and perhaps only end in physical violence. Solemn appeals to our sentiments of indignation and pity are likely to succeed only for the duration of the show, of the demonstration, or the prayer meeting, or the hours of reading. Then the mood passes, it goes to the four winds and love's labour's lost. But the art of ridicule, if it is on the mark––and if it is not on the mark it is not art at all––can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyse its object.[38]

By declining the false comforts that rampant sentimentality brings and in turn sidestepping its more pernicious undercurrents, Spark's unfeeling art of ridicule can be discomfiting, insofar as a constant sensitivity to, and critical engagement with, society at large necessarily entails some measure of discomfort. Although such a quality is only fully appreciated by an intellectual, artistic disposition in tune with Spark's, it accounts perhaps for why critics find her difficult to place and, in many ways, unnerving. This is because she appears to do their work for them.

Spark's concern in "The Desegregation of Art" is, after all, literary and critical. As she says in a 2003 interview, "I feel that I'm a critic all the way along. That while I'm writing, I'm both a critic and a writer. The two functions are at work."[39] Spark is certainly speaking as both critic and writer throughout "The Desegregation of Art", though her dual purpose becomes much more overt in a less famous paragraph, in which she posits that critics "in every field of art … rightly prune and cultivate, they

[38] Spark, "Desegregation," 29.
[39] "Interview with Muriel Spark." By James Brooker and Margarita Estévez Saá. March 2003. *Women Studies* 33 (2004): 1045.

attempt to practise good husbandry," especially since "the art of literature is a personal expression of ideas which come to influence the minds of people even at second, third and fourth hand." Acknowledging this fact, we can begin to see the necessity for, as well as the serious political implications of, many of Spark's statements. "Literature infiltrates and should fertilise our minds … And if this is true, then ineffective literature must go."[40] Society, as a whole, would benefit from an artistic culture that leans not on unthinking sentimentality, but on the intelligence offered by the honing of our more critical faculties which would give us a clearer, more realistic view of ourselves and our society. As Spark emphasises towards the end of her speech, "We should know ourselves better by now than to be under the illusion that we are all essentially aspiring, affectionate and loving creatures. We do have these qualities, but we are aggressive, too."[41] Here, again, is another perspective clarified and sharpened, another illusion dispelled. Though "superbly uncuddly," in Christopher Tayler's memorable description of "The Desegregation of Art," Spark's art is animated by a more critical––more intellectual––disposition.[42]

The Unfeeling Sparks of Satire and of Ridicule: A Renewed Artform for Today

When Spark gave "The Desegregation of Art" on 26 May 1970, arguing as she did for the importance of "[s]harp, unsentimental intelligence,"[43] there were "some in the audience [who] were baffled," and some who, clearly distracted, were "struck by [the] timidity" of her voice. (Spark reportedly "loathed public speaking.")[44] But it was

[40] Spark, "Desegregation," 27.
[41] Spark, "Desegregation," 29.
[42] Tayler, Christopher. "Uncuddly." *London Review of Books* 36.18. September 25, 2014: 7.
[43] Stannard. *Biography*, 369-370.
[44] Ibid., 366.

deemed, by others, "a sparkling performance" and a "brave speech in that literary atmosphere."[45] Despite the intervening half century, Spark's points are ever more apposite to our current literary and political climate, in part because little has changed, and a sharper, more intellectual discernment is as lacking in today's world as it was then. The "artistic culture…of depicted suffering" Spark disparages, with all its "[s]olemn appeals to our sentiments of indignation and pity," has morphed into a popular culture of taking offence.[46] Today's world is one that rings with myriad voices screaming into the void of the internet; our "common currency" now awash with much clamour and rancour and misdirected anger.[47] And these cathartic displays of emotion are, if anything, more ephemeral than they appeared in Spark's day. The feelings Spark feared "likely to succeed only for the duration of the show, of the demonstration, or the prayer meeting, or the hours of reading" now seem only destined to last for the duration of the retweeting of supposedly 'woke' posts, the adding of flags and faces to social media profiles, the clicking 'yes' on strike action polls, and the compulsive participation in, and stoking of, 'culture wars.' Yet so often these activities are performed in the name of empathy; our immediate feelings and reactions marshalled at the expense of any sort of thinking.

"The Desegregation of Art" carries Spark's vision for an unfeeling, unflinching, and superbly uncuddly artform, whose more intellectual disposition would elegantly dispatch the often loud-mouthed pseudo-inclusivities of feeling and empathy and sentiment. Another of Derek Stanford's insightful comments on Spark's work helps to strike up the contrast:

[45] Ibid., 370.
[46] Spark, "Desegregation," 28.
[47] Ibid., 26.

> Bernard Shaw once declared that the secret of success in literature was to slap the public's face. Now there is nothing so unmannerly as face-slapping about Muriel Spark's fiction. The chastisement it administers is very much more subtle; more difficult to locate and repudiate.[48]

So too for "The Desegregation of Art," which goes some way in exposing Spark's concern, as formulated by David Herman in relation to her work, with "what methods of transformation might make art a more integral part of everyday life, even as it maintains a necessary critical stance towards the sphere of the everyday."[49] In turn, it goes some way, too, to shifting our understanding of the substantially edifying, if still counterintuitive, value of unfeeling in Spark's art as well as the tenor and import of the established critical perspectives on that particular quality. That "detachment is the genius of [Spark's] fiction," as John Updike famously pronounced in 1961, that her "simplicity is diagrammatic rather than sensual; her hard, unflecked prose … laid on from a calculated distance,"[50] is no longer a merely complimentary assessment of her aesthetic achievement but the necessary corollary to the higher purpose of her writing; an unfeeling art which, as Patricia Waugh claims, is more truthfully "oriented to a civic responsibility," as it allows for more intellectual, more discerning engagements with the world at large.[51]

But this "diamond-edge of wit" to Spark's art also, as a result, makes unusual demands on its readers and critics.[52] As Martin Stannard astutely observes, "no one

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[48] Stanford, 108.
[49] Herman, David. Introduction. *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*. Ed. David Herman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 5.
[50] Updike, John. "Creatures of the Air." *The New Yorker* 37. 30 September 1961. 161.
[51] Waugh, "Muriel Spark's 'Informed Air': Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction," 1652.
[52] Stanford, 116.

acquainted with her fiction can ignore its persistent suggestion that there are as many kinds of truth as there are observers in a world where evil and stupidity are ubiquitous."[53] And it is only through better, more discerning critical engagements with Spark's desegregated art that her concomitant suggestion—that there is no longer a "question of good or evil, merely one of intelligence and absurdity"—becomes impetus for a more lively sense of reading, knowing, being, and creating in a world that is reportedly post-truth, post-fact, perhaps still postmodern, and figures as powerful potential for discerning dissidence against violence of every kind.[54]

[53] Stannard, xviii.
[54] Stannard, 420.