**Muriel Spark on Love**

By Willy Maley

On St Valentine’s Day in Muriel Spark’s centenary year we might ask: what does Spark have to say to us about love and romance? At first sight there doesn’t seem a lot to go on. Most of her published pronouncements on love are cool and ironic. In her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), Spark observed: “From my experience of life I believe my personal motto should be ‘Beware of men bearing flowers’”. Her husband, Sidney Oswald Spark (SOS) had brought her flowers when she had flu and said he was lonely; it didn’t end well. She was unlucky in love, a “bad picker” as she put it, and love had nothing to do with her decision to marry. Pity, flowers, foreign travel, and the promise of no housework did the trick. Yet ten years later, in 1947, Spark came first in a Love Lyric competition run by the *Poetry Review*. But her entry, “a metaphysical sonnet”, was, she insisted, “merely an old-fashioned exercise in what I thought would win that poetry prize”. Again, love had little part to play.

Spark’s writing generally conveys a deep cynicism about romantic love. There are many sly and humorous depictions of love and lovers in Spark’s fiction, including those of Leslie and Wally in *Loitering with Intent* (1981), neither of whom seem fit partners for budding novelist Fleur Talbot, Spark’s alter ego. There are a few genuine romances in her work if you look for them, like that between Barbara Vaughan and Harry Clegg in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), and Nancy Hawkins and William Todd in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988);

but it would be tempting to assume from both her fiction and her biographical writing that falling in love was not something Spark had ever done, or allowed herself to do. She did have a number of relationships with men after her marriage ended, but she did not reveal much detail about those affairs. It is usually suggested by biographers that these were relationships doomed to fail for a variety of reasons, not least being her lack of commitment to the men involved, or her unwavering commitment to her art, or both. However I would argue that there is some evidence Spark did indeed fall deeply in love, at least once.

Spark had two literary lovers while she was a struggling writer, men with whom she collaborated and shared a love of poetry. The best documented of these is Derek Stanford. We know that initially Spark declared her love for Stanford and found in him a close ally, but her feelings were ambivalent and he later fell out of favour over what she saw as a betrayal of trust. When she took up with Stanford she had been on the rebound from a more romantically interesting, yet generally overlooked, lover: the poet and editor Howard Sergeant. Their eighteen month relationship is lightly dismissed in her autobiography, but on closer investigation we can see that Sergeant played a key role at a crucial period in her formation as a writer, and if we look at some of her lesser-known poetry there is evidence that Spark genuinely seems to have fallen head-over-heels in love with him.

In a poem entitled “Standing in Dusk”, one of a sequence about Sergeant that Spark wrote in 1947-48, the speaker reaches “in the long night of extremity/ for you, my love,/ needing your steadfast sun/ wherewith my whirling earth/ would make a dawn”. Spark dedicated a copy of this poem to Sergeant on November 10, 1947, and it seems to have been part of a complex call and response as the lovers conducted a poetic dialogue. In its yearning “Standing in Dusk” is quite poignant (Spark uses the word herself) in invoking her absent lover. A later poem, “Anniversary”, marks the end of the affair in its opening line: “Our love approaches the last episode”.

When we look at her other poems of 1948, at least two of them are intense, almost obsessive, love poems. “A Letter to Howard”, in the first flush of passion, invokes a kind of religious fervour with its biblical phrasing, repetition and imagery: “My love, full of wonder today I call you by everlasting,/ I call you by tide and by rock, by the name of those/ fowl and fishes that people them. Trees have affinity/ with shells, anemones with leopards since I gather/ their differences together in your name”.

Howard also seems to be the inspiration for other poems of Spark’s from that period, including “Song of the Divided Lover”’, “Lost Lover”, and “She Wore His Luck on Her Breast”. In “He is Like Africa”, later revised, retitled and reprinted as “Like Africa” – the continent represents her lover in all his magnificence: “He is like Africa in whose/ White flame the brilliant acres lie/ And all his nature’s latitude/ Gives earnest of the simile”. Sergeant is described as a continent, a proud wild animal, the Zambesi River. This poem comes close to “Anniversary” in that both verses draw on imagery from Spark’s African experiences. Her courtship with Sergeant was conducted in the language of that continent. Sergeant had written to Spark from Glasgow on 5 February 1948, saying he was “trying to build up a picture” of her past life, and complaining that in sharing her stories with him she has “left out all the love poems – which are the most interesting from my point of view”.

It seems from her wistful poetry that Spark grieved over the end of this affair. Fortunately its ending coincided with a turning point in her journey as a writer, and she went into overdrive, pouring her passion onto the page, winning a major short story competition and producing several biographies before emerging as a novelist of great distinction. Spark suggested her poor choices in love may have been a subconscious desire to let nothing come between her and her writing. She later insisted that it was her 1954 conversion to Catholicism that opened the door to her life as a writer, but she won *The Observer* short story award and published poetry, criticism and biographies before her first novel appeared in 1957, so that claim has always seemed odd. The end of the affair with Howard Sergeant carries some weight as an earlier crossroads and crisis of faith, since it suggested that hers would be the solitary road of a writer.

None of Spark’s old flames could hold a candle to her, but that should not mean that her early passions and love affairs should be brushed aside. There is a band of (usually) male critical admirers who deny the significance of her love life as if they are gallantly upholding her honour. But they are brushing against the grain of Spark’s own passions and experience of love. It is likely that Spark’s elision of Sergeant from her biography came about not because he was insignificant to her, as critics have often claimed, but quite the opposite. It was too painful for her to open up about him.

When it comes to Stanford, despite the bitterness in some of her later accounts of him, she acknowledged his support and affinity as a book-lover. “I found his company refreshing […] and his love of literature infectious”. She could see beneath surfaces, unlike writer William Boyd, who in the recently broadcast BBC centenary documentary, “The Many Primes of Muriel Spark”, wonders what Spark saw in Stanford. Boyd labels him “a jobbing hack” in contrast with the “beautiful and incandescent” Spark. But she never judged a book or lover by its cover. Rather, she understood that people were multi-layered and complex, and feelings could be the same.

In a short essay written in 1984 simply entitled “Love” Spark acknowledges this complexity. Love is indeed difficult to pin down or understand: “The most unlikely people may fall in love with each other; their friends, amazed, look for the reason. This is useless; there is no reason”. According to Spark: “Falling in love is by nature an unforeseen and chance affair, but it is limited by the factor of opportunity”. As a character in one of her short stories remarks: “Love is an expedition of discovery into unexplored territory”. This haphazard happenstance of the heart is the key to Spark’s view of love. She tells us in her essay that “love is inexplicable […] like poetry”, and describes how “it includes a certain amount of passion and desire, a certain amount of madness while it lasts”.

She seems to be speaking from experience, yet at the same time she maintains a distance from the subject itself, discussing love mainly in the third person and concluding that the mating behaviour of animals – young hares, or horses – is more pleasing to her than that among humans. She ends the essay with two clichés: “But certainly, as the old songs say, love is the sweetest thing, and it makes the world go round.” It’s as if she wants to close down the subject before saying too much and revealing anything too personal. She was clearly reluctant to talk about love openly other than comically or in dismissive terms, not because it was irrelevant to her life but because it had caused her pain.

Spark’s ability to take a personal experience and revise it is clear in a poem she published in 1949 in the wake of her affair with Sergeant, which can be read as a moving, heartfelt struggle to deal with love’s aftermath. “The Voice of One Lost Sings Its Gain” includes the lines, “It is the pain I move in and the best/ of a woman is lost somewhere in me./ O pain, pain, pain”. Part of this poem resurfaces as Fleur Talbot’s verse entitled “Metamorphosis” in *Loitering with Intent*, her novel set in the years of transition from Sergeant to Stanford, and it appears again, depersonalised, as “Flower into Animal” in Spark’s collected poems in 2002, where the lines quoted above are altered to read: “It is a pain to choke with, when the best/ of a species gets lost somewhere./ Different, indifferent pain”. In this later form it is much less clear that the poem refers to the pain of a broken heart. Some of Spark’s early poetry reveals that she did indeed experience deep love, and its dramatic loss. And incidentally, “Love” is the word with which Martin Stannard’s biography of Spark ends: “The recording of her last major interview was delayed by the baying of her dog outside. ‘Poor thing,’ she said. ‘It’s howling for love’”. Spark knew the feeling.