Hard Sayings

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I. On the Superior Pleasures of Catholicism

When Muriel Spark died in 2006, after a career that spanned five decades, obituaries duly identified her as a Catholic writer, and the most perceptive of them followed earlier critics in noting her affinities with Flannery O’Connor. Both writers avow a religious dimension in their work; both have a marked hatred for sentimentality; and both are known for violence and shock—not only in the fates that often befall their characters but also in their frequent use of narrators who violate conventional readerly exp-

1. Roger Kimball, for instance, observes that in Spark’s work, “There is a moral but no catechism. In this respect, if in few others, her work recalls the Gothic realism of the American novelist and master of the short story Flannery O’Connor. For both writers, the operation of grace is generally a funny but decidedly astringent affair” (2). Though he approaches Spark from a different angle, arguing rather too breezily that “in principle there is no disagreement between Spark and Derrida” (171), Willy Maley’s essay from four years before reaches a similar judgment: “[I]n her Catholicism, Gothicism, formalism, and dispassionate rendering of the struggle between good and evil, Spark resembles in many ways Flannery O’Connor . . .” (178).
tations by passing intrusive judgment on the characters. Perhaps for these very reasons, both have achieved their greatest success in shorter fictional forms—for O’Connor, the short story; for Spark, the novel considered, as Rodney Stenning Edgecombe argues, as an expanded epigram, “with all the spurious finality or, conversely, the elegant incompleteness that characterizes the form” (2). Not surprisingly, both have also been loved and hated for similar reasons. Until recently, admirers tended to view their fiction as caustically witty arguments for theological truths and their use of violence as a means of presenting such truths without pious cliché. Detractors, often positioning themselves against the writers’ religious beliefs, have found their purposes antihumanist and repellent, and their lack of sympathetic identification with their characters—often presented through authoritarian narrators—aesthetically crippling. Richard Mayne’s characterization of Spark’s method is characteristic: “Always, behind the tale, there lurks an alert didactic narrator . . . [with] a mother-knows-best dead-certainty that holds Mrs. Spark’s novels in what her actress’ ghost-writer would call a vise-like grip.” (49).

Any comparison between the two writers, however, reveals not only the obvious differences of setting and tone (O’Connor’s backwoods Georgia contrasted with Spark’s urban Edinburgh or cosmopolitan Italy, or O’Connor’s realism-cum-grotesquerie with Spark’s austere echoes of the *nouveau roman*) but also an asymmetry in critical interest—which even so blunt an instrument as the MLA International Bibliography reveals.² Despite a much larger body of work, Spark has provoked far less commentary than O’Connor. Though this asymmetry may simply reflect O’Connor’s greater stature as a writer, a more immediately plausible reason for it is the greater certainty among readers of what is at stake in reading O’Connor. It is impossible, as I argued in chapter 1, to avoid confronting O’Connor’s own justification for her work. And the gravity of what is at stake—salvation or damnation—demands attention, even from readers who wish that critics would find something else to talk about.

Spark’s own statements about her religion and art, however, are fewer and far more guarded. Though she has consistently maintained that her Catholicism is essential to her writing voice, she has provided neither theological context nor approved readings of her work, asserting (not entirely credibly), “I don’t set out to be a Catholic apologist in any form” (McQuillan interview 217). In interviews, she has expressed exasperation with the stupidity of other Catholics, the priesthood, and the liturgy, and while she

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² A keyword search for “Flannery O’Connor” on 13 June 2011 yielded 1,206 sources; one on the same date for “Muriel Spark” yielded only 245.
has not taken on the public role of a dissenting Catholic, she has acknowledged her own departures from Catholic teaching with blithe indifference. Even her famous reference to Catholic belief as “a norm from which one can depart” (“My Conversion” 26) for satirical purposes hardly suggests the same commitment to core Christian propositions that one sees in O’Connor. And while references to Catholicism abound in Spark’s novels (in this, her work is far more overtly “Catholic” than O’Connor’s), their significance is more obscure, lacking the portentous intrusions of the divine into everyday life that characterize O’Connor’s fiction.

Only in the first nine years of Spark’s career as a novelist, in the works stretching from *The Comforters* (1957) to *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), is it possible to identify continuous, though often qualified, support for Catholic beliefs—and indeed, both Spark’s religious admirers and her detractors tend to emphasize these novels. As with O’Connor, the degree of interest in these early novels seems to correspond to a sense of what is theologically at stake. Yet even among them, only *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Bachelors* (1960), and possibly *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) move beyond a glancingly favorable presentation of Catholicism to present anything like O’Connor’s repeated argument that Christianity is true and that nothing is more important than recognizing its truth. What Frank Baldanza observed about Spark’s work in 1965 remains apt many novels later: “[S]he has not treated themes that make any direct confrontation with Roman Catholic dogma [. . . . ] the practice of a religious discipline [in her novels] is not very widespread, and where it does exist, it seems to make relatively little difference one way or the other in terms of the moral or immoral acts of her characters” (191, 194).

Moreover, beginning with *The Public Image* (1968), the references to Catholicism no longer suggest general approval. Many of these references seem to be arbitrary, not fully integrated into the text, and repeated for no apparent reason from novel to novel, as if Spark were merely brandishing a trademark. The religious framework that had seemed crucial to understanding the earlier novels now often reads as another aspect of what Bernard Harrison calls the “studied inconsequentiality” (131) of Spark’s style:

Nothing is ever fully explained or given depth. When, at crucial points, the puzzled reader demands explicit enlightenment, he is invariably fobbed off with an authorial giggle or a significant silence. Or novels suddenly peter out into scraps and fragments of action and conversation, as at the end of *Jean Brodie* or *The Comforters*, and the reader is left to work out for himself why these particular fragments have been shored against the ruin of what had appeared until then, at least in long stretches, to be
almost a conventional plot [...]. On this view, surface and fashionable enigma have finally won out: there is nothing to be seen but what is to be seen, and that is precious little, though terribly stylish. (133)

Such a perception of Spark’s work, certainly plausible enough, probably explains why she has fewer orthodox defenders than O’Connor.

It also certainly explains why many of Spark’s more recent fans, committed to a mystique of transgression and often drawing upon poststructuralist theory, are impatient with talk of her Catholicism. Bryan Cheyette, for instance, argues that “her playful and anarchic fiction ... disrupts the certainties of her supposedly stable identity as a ‘Catholic writer’” (ix). He does not deny that religious conversion is important in Spark’s work, but he decries attempts to impose a “conversionist orthodoxy” (11) on readings of it, because such an orthodoxy “unproblematically splits the self into old and new, before and after, inner and outer. Conversion, in these terms, is turned into a form of determinism and becomes a rather too facile act of redemption” (7). Martin McQuillan, on the other hand, grants that Spark is a Catholic writer but then defines Catholicism so broadly as to be meaningless. “[E]ven the documents of the Catholic church are not Catholic,” he maintains, because, as writing, they necessarily undermine “essential and stable meanings, which presuppose and seek an authoritative center.” On the other hand, given the sheer historical influence of Christianity (and monotheism more generally), “[i]t is impossible to be European today and not be ‘Catholic,’ it is impossible to live in the world today and not to be, in some way, ‘Abrahamic’” (4, 5). Against both critics, I maintain that after several decades of such moves, few things are more “facile” than ritual proclamations against binary oppositions and appeals to the endless proliferation of meaning, whether attributed to a particular writer or to language itself. Indeed, there is an implicit (and false) binary in such arguments—one that pits putatively authoritarian dogma against putatively free interpretive play.

In this chapter I will argue that Spark’s presentation of religious belief is best seen neither as a seamless argument for orthodoxy nor as a testament to the anarchy of writing but as a rhetorical strategy adapted to the population with whom she has most often identified—namely, “really intelligent people, more or less intellectuals.” Spark does not, of course, provide a rigorous, Gramscian definition of “intellectual,” but the positive connotations that she evokes are familiar enough: intellectuals belong to

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3. Still more amusingly, McQuillan maintains that “heaven, death, hell, and judgement” are “ideas not currently en vogue in the Catholic church” (5)—as if references to them had been quietly expunged from documents and liturgies.
an intelligent, creative, and ethically sensitive minority, capable of greater logical reasoning and finer aesthetic discrimination than the general public, but also more attuned to the connections between language and power. The relationship between “intellectuals” in this broad sense and religion in the late twentieth century is uneasy, for although, as Terry Eagleton has observed, religion “is capable of operating at every social level: if there is a doctrinal inflection of it for the intellectual elite, there is also a pietistic brand of it for the masses” (Literary Theory 20), it is nevertheless evident that many twentieth-century intellectuals, committed to a narrative that links secularization with modernity, have tended to regard religion either as a lifestyle accessory (and so an essentially private and aesthetic concern) or as a crutch for those too afraid or unintelligent to trust their own powers of reasoning. As a Catholic writer, Spark, like O’Connor, is concerned with making religious belief credible to an intellectual audience presumed not to share it. Yet whereas O’Connor assumes the hostility of this audience, deriding intellectuals and obsessively staging the spectacle of bien-pensant hubris laid low, Spark dramatizes her complicity with it. The reader who can appreciate Spark’s cold, whimsical art, seeing in it what she once called “the liberation of our minds from the comfortable cells of lofty sentiment” (“Desegregation” 36), is invited to regard Catholicism in the same light, as a system that affords superior aesthetic delights—if, that is, one can see beyond the tribal vulgarities of one’s fellow Catholics. That it also happens to be true is presented offhandedly, as a kind of fringe benefit.

This rhetorical appeal also suggests a reason for the discrepancy in critical commentary on Spark and O’Connor. To insist too strongly on what is at stake in belief or unbelief, as O’Connor does, would negate Spark’s particular appeal, for such a move would cast the intended reader as someone weak enough to require either the threat of hell or a sentimentally lov-

4. Geoffrey Galt Harpham suggests that “[f]or the past century, the dominant grounding idea for intellectual culture as a whole has been the thought of language. . . . This kind of emphasis on language itself is characteristically modern. A ‘premodern’ orientation, we might say, is signaled by a faith in the primacy of concepts on the one hand and the possibility of an unmediated observation of material fact on the other. . . . The modernist moment is achieved when immediacy in either direction is renounced as an illusion, when the limits of language are seen as the limits of the world, and linguistic mediation itself becomes the object of observation” (4). Though Harpham is speaking primarily of twentieth-century philosophers of language, his observation is equally applicable to twentieth-century “intellectuals” in the broader sense I have defined above, for it speaks to the association of the “intellectual” with aesthetic discrimination and pleasure (a novel, after all, is not an “unmediated” material fact) and to the self-consciousness and anxiety about agency and meaning that such aesthetic facility often promotes. I am tempted to extrapolate from Harpham and to define an intellectual as one who regards language “in itself” as an ultimate reality but cannot decide whether it is the source and expression of freedom (aesthetic play) or the key mechanism that perpetuates determinism (ideology).
ing God. Hence the apparent inconsequentiality of many of Spark’s references to religion: the worthy reader, it would seem, finds aesthetic richness precisely in this lack of consequence. Moreover, this particular aesthetic is bound up with an interest in the peculiar pleasures of determinism, as novel after novel dispenses arbitrary fates to its characters, inviting readers to rejoice in their lack of freedom and to shift their own identification between free narrator and unfree characters continually. The pleasures of such a dialectic of bondage and freedom are real, but they are also characteristic of intellectuals who have acceded to different versions of linguistic determinism—and who, unable to assert a grounded faith in freedom, turn to the delights of subversion as the next best thing. Indeed, readers of Spark who ground themselves in poststructuralist theory, such as Fotini E. Apostolou, tend to reduce her work to “an endless spiral of seduction and death, where one enters a structure that envelopes him/her in order to create a construct that will imprison others, who will, in their turn, desire to be enticed by this construct in order to enter and change it” (xvi).

Though Spark does indeed appeal to such pleasures, she provides a more orthodox frame within which to understand them—one that reflects her own conversion to Catholicism under the influence of John Henry Newman. Known for his intellectual rigor, his highly aesthetic use of rhetoric in the Apologia Pro Vita Sua, his devotion to the beauties as well as the theology of the Eucharist and the liturgy, and his theory of the “illative sense” that emphasizes the personal nature of the apprehension of truth, Newman combines the sense of intellectual and aesthetic richness that Spark relishes with an appeal to the determinism implicit in any appeal to the irreducibly personal. Viewed through Newman’s theory, Spark’s playful investigations of the relationship between writing and determinism suggest that the apprehension of religious truth comes more easily and is more rewarding

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5. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are representative figures here—indeed, it might be said that they make unusually explicit the anxiety about the relationship between language and power that is characteristic of twentieth-century intellectuals more generally and try to defuse it by suggesting that subversion is the only possible recourse in a linguistically determined world. The later work of Foucault (especially the volumes of The History of Sexuality) repeats the double gesture of invoking the omnipresence of power and discourse on the one hand and cataloguing the possibilities of self-cultivation within such a determinist framework on the other. Butler’s entire oeuvre is a continual turning of the screws of this problem, an attempt to account for the emergence of a subject’s severely limited agency from within a totality that subordinates subjects even as it calls them into being. A major consequence of Foucault and Butler’s work, as Martha Nussbaum has suggested, has been the eroticization of power and subversion. Though I cannot mount here a full-scale critique of such a position, suffice it to say that even if there were not good reasons to doubt the characterization of language as a “prison-house” (to allude to Fredric Jameson), the repeated description of such moves has become stupefyingly boring.
for those gifted enough to see its complexity—which is to say, those with an aesthetic and intellectual disposition. Indeed, it may be that one way to understand Spark is to see her as a kind of “bridge” figure between Newman and such contemporary theological developments as Radical Orthodoxy, which reaffirm the urgency of Christianity within postmodernity and have much to say about the intersection between Christianity and aesthetics—though such a comparison might too blithely suggest the interchangeability of art and theology.

In making this argument about Spark’s rhetorical strategies against certain emphases in poststructuralist theory, I am in basic agreement with Wayne Booth’s claim that in a work of fiction, “the author’s judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it” (Rhetoric of Fiction 20)—though I would add that Booth’s matter-of-fact tone here understates the difficulty of such a task in a writer as cerebral as Spark. Booth’s insight that “unreliable” fictions frequently “depend for their effects on ironic collusion between the author and his readers” (391) is true of nearly all of Spark’s work, and it becomes especially so after 1965, but such collusion is achieved only through considerable labor on the part of the reader, which in turn tends to confirm readers who believe themselves to be “in” on her project in their own intellectual prowess. In what follows, I will demonstrate the successes and sketch some of the limitations of Spark’s rhetorical strategies, tracing her portrayal of Catholicism as a system that provides superior intellectual and aesthetic delights even as it continues to foreground the problem of how to reconcile freedom with divine providence, the author’s design with the expectation that characters in a novel be recognizably free. In most of the novels that I examine—The Comforters, The Girls of Slender Means (1964), The Abbess of Crewe (1974), Loitering with Intent (1981), and Reality and Dreams (1996)—Spark foregrounds characters who are aspiring or accomplished artists, as if to suggest that both the problems and the potential achievements of Catholic belief should be understood primarily in aesthetic terms and only secondarily in terms of truth.

II. Freeing Oneself from a Novel:

The Strange Case of The Comforters

At the center of Spark’s aesthetic, as many have noted, is an analogy between an author’s control over her work and God’s omnipotence. The characters in a novel are, of course, not “free,” but Spark is perhaps unusual in highlighting the moral problematic that this basic fact of the reading
experience provokes—what Ruth Whittaker calls the tension between “the formal demands of her art and the mute claims of her characters for narratorial recognition of their humanity” (150). David Lodge has read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as a contest between “the Catholic God who allows for free will and the Calvinistic one who doesn’t” (“Time-Shift” 76), but the novelist is necessarily like the Calvinist God, and any attempt to view a novel as relevant to real life therefore invites the problem of how to square the tendency to judge characters as if they were free agents with their actual lack of freedom. In chapter 1, I referred to Marina MacKay’s argument that a Catholic genealogy of the novel, as opposed to the Leavisite assumption of the genre’s Protestant underpinnings, might yield a different understanding of character and of one’s judgment of it. Whereas “[c]haracter in life and the novel were conflated because Leavisite criticism tapped into the evangelical spirit of the nineteenth century” that “people are capable of changing” (228), a Catholic lens might well suggest that change is unpredictable, performative, and paradoxical—with the corollary that “the realized individual character is, in fact, the least free of all” (231). In this framing of the problem, the dichotomy is not between Calvinist and Catholic Author-Gods but between an illusory Protestant freedom and an illusory Catholic determinism. Perhaps the “determined” quality of a character in a novel in fact functions as the clearest sign of the character’s freedom—if only because such characters frustrate readers’ attempts to understand them.

This is, in fact, how MacKay reads Spark’s novel *The Driver’s Seat* (1970). Lise, the novel’s protagonist, intends to be murdered and chooses her murderer. Her victimization is proleptically announced by the narrator early in the novel, but only near the end do readers discover that she has been pulling the strings all along, despite the fact that they know nothing of her motivations: “Spark gives autonomy to a character who consequently becomes depthless and unmotivated. The driver’s seat is the death of character” (MacKay 232). As the narrator maintains of Lise, “Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?” (53). A similar situation structures *Not to Disturb* (1971), whose plot Martin Stannard engagingly summarizes: “The servants of the Château Klopstock await the inevitable bloody deaths of their masters and prepare to profit from this by appropriating the contents of the house and by selling the story . . . Neither are we told how Lister and his crew know that murder is imminent, and know with such certainty that they have alerted journalists, written a scenario, and arranged for two pornographic film-makers to be on hand” (381–82). When the plot in which the servants wish to entrap their masters threatens to come apart, a quick and inventive rewriting occurs. In both novels, an author-figure—whether
Spark herself in *The Driver’s Seat* or the servants in *Not to Disturb*—maintains and even flaunts control of plot, while the dominated characters remain stubbornly opaque.

Yet I would argue that Spark’s most accomplished variation on this theme occurs in her first novel, *The Comforters*, which lacks the icy impersonality of these later works. *The Comforters* reads less like a *tour de force* but proves more penetrating as a moral inquiry, in part because of its thinly disguised autobiographical element, which works against the systematic foreclosing of moral judgment that *The Driver’s Seat* and *Not to Disturb* attempt.6 The central figure of the novel, Caroline Rose, is a recent convert to Catholicism and a writer (working on a study called *Form in the Modern Novel*) who has, after her conversion, given up sex with her boyfriend, Laurence Mathers. Convinced of the truth of Catholic dogma, she endures much irritation for it—less from the incomprehension of her friends and Laurence (who is himself a lapsed Catholic) than from the pettiness and tribalism of most of the Catholics she encounters, whom she regards as stupid, ugly, and “infatuated with a tragic image of themselves” (37). Shortly after Caroline is introduced, she flees from a retreat at the Pilgrim Centre of St. Philumena after unpleasant conversations with Mrs. Georgina Hogg, who disapprovingly says, “You’re the sort that doesn’t mix” (29), wears no brassiere under her cotton blouse, and describes her position at St. Philumena’s as a miracle effected by the intervention of the Virgin Mary (32–33). Though disgusted by such pious believers, Caroline finds in the discrepancy between them and the truth of Catholic dogma confirmation of the Church’s authenticity.7 When Laurence tells her that she is

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6. Willy Maley, in my judgment the best of Spark’s critics who draw upon poststructuralist theory, has also made the best possible case for the merits of *Not to Disturb*, though he does not emphasize the freedom that lack of characterological depth might intimate. He finds, instead, an exposure of the “mutually assured destruction between aristocracy and peasantry, between the arrogant and the ignorant (however knowing in the ways of the world)” (183–84), and connects this exposure to Spark’s often quoted claim that “[r]idicule is the only honourable weapon [artists] have left” (“Desegregation” 35). Thematically, Maley is on to something here, but I do not share his judgment that such deconstructive moves are “disturbing,” nor do I detect any ridicule in them. Spark’s recommendation of ridicule is voiced from a position of moral and aesthetic commitment that may call political commitments into question, but does not prove as self-undermining as a Derridean focus would imply. Because *Not to Disturb* provides no basis for judgment, it works against Spark’s program of an art of ridicule.

7. It is possible to characterize Caroline’s attitude here as “sacramental,” as long as the sacramental is not conflated with the emotionally uplifting. Caroline is a kindred spirit of Sandy Stranger, the convert and nun in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, who achieves fame for writing a book called *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* but whose expectations for ordinary happiness in the Church seem to be dashed nevertheless. Having betrayed Miss Brodie for her fascist sympathies, Sandy discovers in the Catholic Church “quite a number
“always bad-tempered after Mass,” she responds that this is “one of the proofs of the Faith so far as I’m concerned,” because “[t]he flesh despairs” (112) at such contact with her coreligionists. Her favorite fellow Catholic is her Uncle Ernest, a gay man who, like her, has renounced sexual relationships and taken a “critical but conforming” attitude toward Catholicism: “the True Church was awful but, unfortunately, one couldn’t deny, true” (88–89). The novel makes clear that Caroline’s fastidiousness is not itself a product of her conversion itself; it continues an established pattern of “nervous responses to food and sleep at the best of times” and frequent physical illnesses (70). For all her distaste with attitudes of martyrdom, she is accurately judged by Laurence as one who cultivates a “[m]artyrdom by misunderstanding” (232) and by the narrator as possessing a “rapacity for suffering” (37).

Appearing at first to be a straightforward realist narrative, The Comforters shifts decisively toward metafiction when Caroline begins hearing the sound of a typewriter, accompanied by voices that comment on her actions and even her thoughts. She concludes that “a writer on another plane of existence” is using her as a character in a novel (66). (The biblical allusion to the book of Job in the novel’s title now comes into play: Caroline’s “comforters” are those who would provide a coherent explanation for the voices—namely, that she is going mad—rather than permit her to confront the evident fact that there is no reason for her suffering.) As initial fear for her sanity gives way to a determination to resist this unknown author, the third-person narrator of The Comforters begins to express irritation with Caroline’s meddling. When the narrator abruptly relates, “At this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever” (74), Caroline screams in reply (though her words are delayed for eight pages), “That’s a damned lie. You’re getting scared, I think. Why are you suddenly taking cover under that protestation?” (82). Later, when Caroline is in the hospital after suffering injuries in an automobile accident, the narrator complains that at this point in the narrative, “no experience of hers ought to be allowed to intrude,” but because she sleeps badly, she remains awake

of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie” (123). When Sandy, now Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, receives visitors, her mannerisms suggest imprisonment—she “clutches the bars of her grille as if she wanted to escape from the dim parlour beyond, for she was not composed like the other nuns” (33). Here Spark seems to mock Sandy’s impatience, but she also mocks those who would read too much into this gesture and perhaps discredit Sandy’s insights in doing so: “[E]veryone likes to visit a nun, it provides a spiritual sensation, a catharsis to go home with, especially if the nun clutches the bars of the grille” (118–19). See also Benilde Montgomery’s reading of the novel, which perceptively links Sandy’s sense of doctrinal development to Newman’s.
and “turn[s] her mind to the art of the novel, wondering and cogitating, those long hours, and exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative from which she is supposed to be absent from the time” (154, 155). Caroline resists the narrator in other ways as well, complaining that Georgina Hogg is “[n]ot a real-life character . . . only a gargoyle” (157), and that other key events of the plot, such as Laurence’s grandmother’s position as leader of a gang of diamond smugglers, are too implausible to be convincing as fiction. When the narrator reports that Georgina Hogg stops wearing brassieres because it is “like damming up the sea” to restrain her breasts, Caroline responds, “Bad taste . . . Revolting taste,” which prompts a further, defensive remark: ‘Bad taste’—typical comment of Caroline Rose. Wasn’t it she in the first place who had noticed with revulsion the transparent blouse of Mrs. Hogg . . .? It was Caroline herself who introduced into the story the question of Mrs. Hogg’s bosom” (157).

Caroline explains her resistance to the unknown author in explicitly theological terms: “I intend to stand aside and see if the novel has any real form apart from this artificial plot. I happen to be a Christian” (117). Since her faith teaches that human beings are in fact free, she must determine whether her actions and the actions of the other characters correspond to freely undertaken decisions rather than an implausible novelistic logic if she is to maintain her faith. Such an attitude is consistent with her dismissive response to Mrs. Hogg’s talk of miracles and demands for social “mixing”: against such popular piety and appeals to a determinist Providence, she will use her reason to test her faith, apparently secure in the knowledge that faith will prevail. The narrator responds, “All very well for her to resolve upon holding up the action. Easy for her to criticize,” and immediately arranges an automobile crash (118), as if to prove her wrong. It is precisely in the hospital, however, when Caroline is “supposed” to be out of the narrative, that she begins to escape the narrator’s complete control precisely by meditating on the art of the novel. Though her “sense of being written into the novel” remains “painful,” she also begins to glimpse her eventual deliverance from it: “[N]ow she was impatient for the story to come to an end, knowing that the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it” (206). Evidently, fiction is both a means of domination over helpless characters and a medium that can teach readers something about their own freedom. How to reconcile this apparent paradox?

The final resolution of the plot, which confirms Caroline’s continued entrapment yet gestures toward a sense in which she might also be free, is anticipated when Laurence asks, “How is your book going?” and she responds, “I think it is nearing the end.” Laurence, who means her book Form in the Modern Novel, is surprised, “for only a few days since she had
announced that the work was slow in progress” (190). When Laurence presses her to clarify, she says, “I look forward to the end of the book . . . in a manner of speaking to get some peace”—here clearly referring to the book “about” her. Immediately afterward, she asks, “Do you remember the passage in Proust where he discusses the ambiguous use of the word book . . .?” (194). Though she does not specify which passage from Proust she has in mind, this allusion is enough to alter a reader’s sense of how The Comforters configures the freedom of its characters.

As Dorrit Cohn has painstakingly argued in The Distinction of Fiction, Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past possesses a “generic ambiguity” (58) that makes it difficult for readers to read it confidently either as a novel or as an autobiography. Though Cohn concludes that the work is a novel, she admits that a “genuinely fictional reading” of it is extremely difficult to achieve, both because “the sheer mass of essayistic, philosophical discourse in the Recherche discourages the mental construction of a narrator who is not identified with the author” and because “criteria of narrative content and narrative mode are too weak, as compared to contractual criteria, to enforce a bona fide fictional reading” (78). By referring to “Proust” rather than to “Proust’s narrator” or even to “Marcel,” Caroline tacitly endorses an autobiographical reading of the text, and though she does not specify which passage from the work she has in mind, thematically there is a strong case made for this one on the “livre intérieur” from the final third:

As for the interior book of unknown symbols (symbols carved in relief they might have been, which my attention, as it explored my unconscious, groped for and stumbled against and followed the contours of, like a diver exploring the ocean bed), if I tried to read them no one could help me with any rules, for to read them was an act of creation in which no one can do our work for us or even collaborate with us. How many for this reason turn aside from writing! . . . But excuses have no place in art and intentions count for nothing: at every moment the artist has to listen to his instinct, and it is this that makes art the most real of all things, the most austere school of life, the true last judgment. This book, more laborious to decipher than any other, is also the only one which has been dictated to us by reality, the only one of which the “impression” has been printed in us by reality itself. . . . The book whose hieroglyphs are patterns not traced by us is the only book that really belongs to us. . . . What we have not had to decipher, to elucidate by our own efforts, what was clear before we looked at it, is not ours. . . . I had arrived then at the conclusion that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, that we do not choose how we shall make it but that it pre-exists us and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a
law of nature, that is to say to discover it. . . . In this conclusion I was con-

firmed by the thought of the falseness of so-called realist art, which would
not be so untruthful if we had not in life acquired the habit of giving to
what we feel a form of expression which differs so much from, and which
we nevertheless after a little time take to be, reality itself. (III 913–15)

The simultaneous avowal and disavowal of conscious artistry in this
passage, the claim that the “interior book,” the true book, is achieved only
by pursuing one’s impressions as if to trace “a law of nature,” suggests
Caroline’s own resolution of her predicament: she will become a novel-
ist herself, following not realistic conventions (significantly, she has been
struggling with the chapter in Form in the Modern Novel on realism [59]),
but by listening to “unconscious” suggestions and learning to distinguish
what is true in them. The strongest implication is that while Caroline has
not ceased to be a character in the work, she has also become its author.
Though this suspicion is not confirmed by what Cohn calls “contractual
criteria” (for instance, the narrator never uses the pronoun “I” in a way
that would establish her co-identity with Caroline), Laurence’s discovery
of “an enormous sheaf” for Caroline’s novel in the final pages suggests its
plausibility, as does his reaction to the notes: “You misrepresent all of us”
(232).

Spark does not, to be sure, identify Caroline with herself in the ambig-
uous way that Proust applies the name “Marcel” to his narrator, but the
biographical parallels between her and Caroline extend even to Caroline’s
hearing voices. In January 1954, Spark began having hallucinations as she
worked on a study of T. S. Eliot: “[T]he letters of the words I was reading
became confused. They formed anagrams and crosswords. . . . I thought at
first that there was a code built into Eliot’s work and tried to decipher it”
(Curriculum 204). The hallucinations proved to be an effect of Spark’s taking
Dexedrine as an appetite suppressant, and as she recovered from the drug’s
effects, she resolved “to write a novel about my recent brief but extremely
intense word-game experience” (Curriculum 205), though she recast the
visual hallucinations as auditory. Moreover, Spark responded to the discov-
ery of her hallucinations as Caroline does, coming to believe that despite
their literal falsity, they provided valuable information about herself. As she
put it in a letter of 26 March 1954 to Derek Stanford, “Now I feel released
from a very real bondage & can make use of the experience. The real deliv-
erance is the feeling that I can discover things about myself independent
of the ‘code’—things that I didn’t intuitively find among the anagrams but
which I hope will come to light in my mind & in fact have already done
so” (qtd. in Stannard 157). Here, too, the parallel with the Proust passage—
in which “no one could help” the writer “with any rules” because reading
“the interior book of unknown symbols” is an act of “creation” rather than “collaboration”—is suggestive.8

I have dwelled on these parallels not to argue that The Comforters is merely a disguised autobiography but to suggest that in its reworking of obviously autobiographical material, it provides a revealing point of entry into Spark’s larger argument about the relations among religious belief, aesthetic pleasure, human freedom, and the moral ambiguity of authorship. Laurence reflects that “[r]eligion had so changed Caroline,” for it made her insist that he would “have to be involved personally” to understand her, and the “know-all assumption of the words” had “infuriate[ed] him” (233). He does, it would seem, understand her desire to know the truth and to turn this knowledge into a form of control, for since his childhood, he has delighted in spying on people and reading their private letters (4), though when the shoe is on the other foot, he reacts with rage (78) before, apparently, resigning himself to being “the character called Laurence Manders” (231). The implication seems to be that Caroline’s belief in Catholicism affords her greater freedom to see the truth and to benefit from it—her “personal” involvement absolves her of the charge of merely playing God, for it ensures that she does have a genuine relationship with the truth, a relationship that confirms her vocation as a writer. As Spark put it in “My Conversion,” “Nobody can deny I speak with my own voice as a writer now, whereas before my conversion I couldn’t do it because I was never sure what I was, the ideas teemed but I couldn’t sort them out, I was talking and writing with other people’s voices all the time” (26). Conversion, then, is a vehicle to personal and artistic freedom, but one needs to tread carefully, for there is inevitably a moral hazard in the writer’s trade—predestining the fates of characters as if one were God. By staging a novel in which a Catholic convert character fights for her own freedom and becomes, as it were, her own author, Spark hints—but does not confirm—that a properly religious but suitably intellectual faith alone enables such a liberation, especially if it not accompanied by illusions about its capacity to make human beings nicer.

III. Spark’s Misfit:

The Girls of Slender Means

If The Comforters associates religious faith with pursuit of the truth, artistic ambition, and the extension of one’s freedom, The Girls of Slender Means, 8. It is, admittedly, tempting to read Spark’s experience as an illustration of Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” in which she fights off Eliot, her overdetermined precursor, by creatively misreading what had been his secret, threatening code.
her novel set in London during the final days of the Second World War, seems more analogous to O’Connor’s work, for it uses violence as an occasion for grace and portrays genuine freedom as an elusive, improbable occurrence. The belated explosion of a bomb outside the May of Teck Club, a girls’ hostel, sets the building on fire. As the firemen attempt to rescue those trapped on the top floor, Nicholas Farringdon, a feckless anarchist poet who has frequented the club because he has an idealized image of the girls who live there, witnesses two events in quick succession. First, his lover Selina manages to escape, but as she does so she steals another girl’s Schiaparelli dress that she had coveted. Secondly, Joanna, the daughter of an Anglican curate known for her elocution and her devotion to unworldly romantic ideals, falls to her death as the building collapses. As a result of this shocking juxtaposition—the equivalent of The Misfit’s encounter with the grandmother—Nicholas converts to Catholicism, becomes a priest, and dies in Haiti as a martyr.

In addition to sharing this basic plot structure with O’Connor, Spark reveals herself to be even less committed to the individualized character portrait than O’Connor. Despite the splendidly realized period ambience and sparkling dialogue of The Girls of Slender Means, Spark ruthlessly reduces her characters to types in ways that foreshadow the cipherlike human beings of Not to Disturb, yet simultaneously critiques prevailing stereotypes of the period for their sentimentality. At a moment when the “general axiom” is that “[a]ll the nice people in England were poor” (1), the poverty of the May of Teck girls should speak in their favor, but Spark deftly undercuts such a conclusion: “few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means” (4). The girls themselves are not unique in their corruption: as crowds assemble on VJ night to await the appearance of the royal family, Nicholas witnesses a sailor stab a woman to death, undetected. When he cannot draw attention to the murder because of the thickness and preoccupation of the crowd, Nicholas contents himself with shoving a forged letter in praise of his manuscript (intended to impress a publisher) down the sailor’s blouse, because “it was a gesture. That is the way things were at the time” (183). Collectively obsessed with “love and money” (27), individually the girls and their boyfriends are reduced to a few broad strokes and “gestures”: Joanna is idealistic and naïve, Selina stupid and “extremely slim” (36), Jane “fat but intellectually glamorous by virtue of the fact that she worked for a publisher” (33), and Nicholas himself a familiar, pretentious type of artist. The repeated taglines and idées fixes that might seem to convey individuality in fact do just the opposite, so that the predictability of everyone forms a background against
which Nicolas’s conversion, the genuinely free or genuinely providential act, registers more strongly.

Yet despite these similarities, Spark’s novel also provides revealing contrasts to O’Connor’s method. Whereas “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” moves chronologically toward the encounter between the grandmother and The Misfit, whose gravity it is impossible to doubt, Spark does not foreground the conversion when it occurs but treats it from the beginning of her novel as a fait accompli. The novel oscillates between the events of 1945 and brief proleptic passages referring to an unspecified future date, and even in the first chapter presents Nicholas’s conversion and martyrdom, well before introducing him as a character. Later, the reader discovers that it was indeed his observation of Selina’s theft that prompted the conversion, but this information is revealed offhandedly, long before the moment happens: “He had not yet slept on the roof with Selina on the hot summer nights . . . and he had not yet witnessed that action of savagery so extreme that it forced him involuntarily to make an entirely unaccustomed gesture, the signing of the cross upon himself” (73). Interestingly, Nicholas seems less certain than the narrator that this is the moment of conversion, for, as the narrator reports, “Later, reflecting on this lightning scene, he could not trust his memory as to whether he then involuntarily signed himself with the cross. It seemed to him, in recollection, that he did” (161). But to avoid any doubt that he considers his conversion provoked by Selina’s action, whether he remembers crossing himself or not, the narrator reveals that he has left in the manuscript of The Sabbath Notebooks, his collection of pensées, “a note that a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good” (180).

This departure from traditional chronology, which Spark has explained by saying, “I don’t think chronology is causality” (Interview with Sara Frankel 451), in fact implies a more determinist vision of conversion than O’Connor’s. Readers see the author’s design from the beginning, which time cannot alter, and so are partially inoculated against the shock of the event. Moreover, they know Nicholas’s thoughts about what he witnesses far more clearly than they know the grandmother’s—not only because the narrator reports them, but also because the fact that he is not simultaneously the victim and the beneficiary of violence allows him to explain his conversion and so to confirm its necessity. The image with which the novel concludes—one of the remaining May of Teck girls, “sturdy and bare-legged on the dark grass, occupied with her hair” (183)—is remembered by Nicholas years later in Haiti, and what Edgecombe calls this image’s “epigrammatic closure” (60) indeed provides a fitting illustration of Spark’s design.
How, then, should readers understand these differences between O’Connor’s and Spark’s texts? It would seem that Spark, more than O’Connor, has taken to heart Girard’s claim that if an author is free, her characters cannot be. Because readers are never allowed to forget this lack of freedom in Spark’s novel, they must locate her appeal to the reader instead as an ironic, intellectual savoring of the pleasures of determinism. O’Connor, however, in striving to make readers forget her design, and placing at the heart of even a story so heavy with chronological necessity and foreshadowing a space into which any possibility at all might flow, proves both more faithful to Catholic teaching and, as her greater popularity among ordinary readers and critics alike suggests, more accessible.

In subsequent novels, Spark would continue to explore the connections between artistic vision and the truths and benefits of religious faith. In general, the more central Spark’s focus on a particular artist-figure, the greater his or her achievement and freedom. When she pursues a strategy of indirection and interrupted chronology, as in The Girls of Slender Means, she entraps her characters in a predestined structure and invites audiences to admire the turning of her screws: Nicholas’s authorship and conversion, for instance, may associate him with the apprehension of intellectual truth, but it does not confirm his autonomy, as his life ends in a martyrdom reported second-hand rather than witnessed, whose significance is lost even to those who repeat the word. When Spark employs a more straightforward chronology and more consistent focalization through a single character, as in The Abbess of Crewe and Loitering with Intent, her portrayals of artists become both more loving and more fabulous. At the same time, these characters continue to reflect upon the problems of determinism, both in their own conception of themselves before God and in the way they use other people toward the achievement of their artistic goals. As Spark becomes more indulgent with her characters, her stance toward Catholic doctrine becomes more ambiguous, though references to it are never abandoned.

IV. Totality, Freedom, and Personalism: The Influence of Newman

The opening sentence of Spark’s late novel Reality and Dreams gestures toward these problems, both theological and narrative: “He often wondered if we were all characters in one of God’s dreams” (7). By introducing the protagonist with a pronoun rather than a proper name, the novel implies the lack of individual agency associated with dreams. Yet despite such feelings, Tom Richards is not just a character in a novel (and so pre-
sumed to have “depth” and autonomy until proven otherwise) but also, as a film director, a fellow artist. And in fact he displays his own Artist-God complex nakedly, going to ridiculous lengths to control every aspect of his artistic production and dismissing others as “superfluous” (13). When the novel opens, he is in a drugged state of semiconsciousness, recovering in a hospital from a fall from a crane on the set of his current film, tentatively called *The Hamburger Girl*. Reflecting later upon the moments before the fall, he thinks, “Yes, I did feel like God up on that crane. It was wonderful to shout orders through the amplifier and like God watch the team down there group and re-group as bidden” (14). A reader of Flannery O’Connor might suspect that the fall functions as a deserved humiliation. When readers learn that in his drugged state, he had entertained the thought of murdering his wife, Claire, in order to inherit her fortune and to give it to the girl who inspired his film (a young woman glimpsed cooking hamburgers at a campsite kiosk in France), the problem of confusing life and art is established clearly.

At this point, one might refer this problem, as David Lodge does, back to the specific content of Catholicism and its emphasis on freedom. Even if Tom cannot demonstrate his “freedom” from the text in which he is inscribed, Catholic references in the novel might work toward an argument about extratextual human freedom. Here, however, readers confront the apparent arbitrariness of such references. Complaining to one of his friends, Ralph, that “[i]f Auden was alive, he would have come to see me in his shabby clothes,” Tom continues to reminisce about writers he has known, turning the subject to Catholicism as he does so:

“If Graham Greene were alive he would have looked in to see me, perhaps not in hospital but certainly here at home. Sex was his main subject, when you met him at least to start with. He had a mix-up of women and felt guilty the whole time. Without girls I think he couldn’t have carried on. He needed it for his writing. Graham would have sent me a dozen bottles of rare wine or champagne. He would have come for an evening’s talk and drink if he had known I was stuck in this bedroom. He would talk about sex always as if it was the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. Sex and desire and the hazards thereof, such as divorce and venereal disease. I tried to get him on to religion but he was chary of that subject, Catholicism. He believed in it without swallowing everything, which is possible, and in fact more widely practised than one might think. In fact, he couldn’t not believe, in spite of himself.

“So much for his beliefs, but in some ways he had a bureaucratic conception of Catholic doctrine, but so do many Catholics including the pres-
ent Pope [John Paul II]. Greene never called me Tom, by the way. It was always ‘Richards.’ But he called Claire ‘Claire’ of course. Which reminds me of Allen Tate another Catholic who was keen on women. Have you heard of Tate?”

“No,” said Ralph. “Unless you mean an American writer, I seem to remember. . . .”

“You remember right. He was an American poet, critic, and Anglophile. He went to see Pius XII in 1957. He told me how it went. Allen said, ‘Your Holiness, the English and American Catholic Bishops are feeling uneasy about the Index of Forbidden Books. After the acts of censorship under totalitarianism the intelligent Catholic laity want more democratic freedom.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Pius, ‘[Jacques] Maritain was here last week with that problem. Greene came about it recently. How many children,—nephews, do you have?’

‘Allen told him how many.

‘The Pope said, ‘Here are four rosaries. The black ones are for boys, the white for girls.’ End of audience.”

‘Was that the Pope before this?’

‘No it was actually five Popes ago.” (45–47)

This passage is funny, but establishing the target of the humor is surprisingly difficult. Who or what is being mocked here—“cafeteria” Catholics who profess to believe but are selective in their application of belief, such as Greene? (Certainly Greene and Tate were “keen on women.”) Writers who think that promiscuity is essential to their art or take sex too seriously? A Church and Pope so cut off from the laity that the rote dispensing of rosaries passes for “dialogue”? Critics who invariably seek references to Catholicism in Spark’s work, and of whose theories she has become “chary”? The naïveté of Catholic intellectuals such as Tate, whose interest in “democratic freedom” pales in significance next to the truths and of the Church and who deserve to be brushed aside in this way? Ecclesial corruption and infidelity to vows, perhaps hinted in the reference to “nephews”? The ridiculousness of the now-abolished Index—yet another focus for arguments about the scope of freedom? The garrulity and peevishness of an old, ill, and nostalgic man? All of the above? And to what extent are readers to approve of Tom’s judgments about Catholic matters—for instance, that it is possible “to believe without swallowing everything,” or that John Paul II’s conception of doctrine is “essentially bureaucratic”?

9. The reference to nephews alludes to Robert Browning’s “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church,” in which the dying bishop addresses his illegitimate sons as “nephews.”
If readers refer, as they might in the case of O’Connor, to Spark’s commentary on the people mentioned to help them answer these questions, the confusion only deepens. In this passage, Greene “couldn’t not believe, in spite of himself,” but in a 1987 interview Spark used this phrase to refer to herself—and, in the same passage, to distinguish her own kind of “Catholic writing” from Greene’s: “Graham Greene is a different type of Catholic writer. . . . I have the impression that he’s always on the verge of disbelief, and so he’s constantly faced with a conflict. I don’t have that conflict, because I can’t not believe: I couldn’t not believe” (Interview with Sara Frankel 446). Are readers to conclude that Spark has changed her mind about Greene, or that Tom’s assessment of Greene’s belief is unreliable? On the other hand, the notion that Greene “believed in it without swallowing everything” sounds remarkably like Spark’s own position—her distaste for “popular Catholicism,” with its “terrible bleeding hearts, the saints, the Pope, priests,” her claim that she arrives at Mass only “after the sermons, because the sermons are so bad I couldn’t possibly listen to them” (Interview with Sara Frankel 446)—and it even echoes the artist-figures from her fiction, such as Fleur, who resemble her. Of John Paul II, Spark once wrote, “I wouldn’t take the Pope too seriously. He’s a Pole first, a pope second, and maybe a Christian third” (qtd. in Neuhaus 74)—provoking hostility from at least one prominent Catholic intellectual.10 And what of Maritain? When asked whether she accepted Maritain’s claim that Catholics ought to be the best novelists, Spark once replied, “I think Maritain was full of a bit of air, actually,” but did not clarify (Interview with Sara Frankel 447). The specificity of the references leads in numerous directions, but any authority that might attach to them individually seems to disperse. Thus far, complaints of the stylish triviality of it all seem justified.

Perhaps, then, readers should conceive of Spark’s religious references in the broadest sense, so that mention of Greene or John Paul II functions only as a nod to the totality of Catholic belief and practice, as understood by Spark and as revealed to readers through her account of her conversion—the most concise description of which is found in Curriculum Vitae (1993), her autobiography:

In 1953 I was absorbed by the theological writings of John Henry Newman through whose influence I finally became a Roman Catholic. I tried the Church of England first, as being more “natural” and near to home. But I felt uneasy. It was historically too new for me to take to. When I am

10. Richard John Neuhaus: “That’s just vulgar nasty, the kind of thing said by minor celebrities who get interviewed and feel the need to say something smart. . . . I cannot imagine that three hundred years from now, or thirty years from now, anyone will wonder what Muriel Spark might have said about anything” (74–75).
asked about my conversion, why I became a Catholic, I can only say that the answer is both too easy and too difficult. The simple explanation is that I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed; there was no blinding revelation in my case. The more difficult explanation would involve the step by step building up of a conviction; as Newman himself pointed out, when asked about his conversion, it was not a thing one could propound “between the soup and the fish” at a dinner party. (202) 

Though I do not doubt Spark’s sincerity here, her foregrounding of Newman should also be seen as a part of her own appeal to an intellectual audience—a conversion under the sign of an undoubted philosophical giant, who tackles the question of Catholicism’s historical validity and philosophical soundness, carries more weight than one provoked by (to use an example from O’Connor’s “Revelation”) a vision in the sky.

Moreover, Newman’s own account of belief provides a helpful frame around the problem of freedom and determinism in Spark’s work. When Spark declares that she became a Catholic because it was what she already believed, she does not of course mean that she had unknowingly affirmed the existence of purgatory, the Immaculate Conception, or transubstantiation. It does, however, suggest that she understands her conversion as an instance of what Newman calls the “indefectibility of certitude” (Grammar 167). For Newman, certitude has “a definite and fixed place among our mental acts;—it follows upon examination and proof,” and it always has “reference to propositions, one by one” (Grammar 179, 184). Furthermore, once certitude has been achieved, it does not change. Religious conversions, however much they resemble changes in certitude, should be understood as processes of development, in which a human being, tenaciously working through the logic and implications of a given certitude, arrives at a truer understanding of what it encompasses—as in his hypothetical example of three Protestants who change their religious convictions but not their certitudes. 

11. In The Comforters, Caroline’s account of her conversion to Georgina Hogg echoes Newman’s account, though more haughtily. When asked “What made you a Catholic, then?” Caroline responds, “Many reasons . . . which are not too easy to define: and so I prefer not to discuss them” (29).

12. “Thus, of three Protestants, one becomes a Catholic, a second a Unitarian, and a third an unbeliever: how is this? The first becomes a Catholic, because he assented, as a Protestant, to the doctrine of our Lord’s divinity, with a real assent and a genuine conviction, and because this certitude, taking possession of his mind, led him on to welcome the Catholic doctrines of the Real Presence and the Theotocos, till his Protestantism fell off from him, and he submitted himself to the Church. The second became a Unitarian, because, proceeding on
“sense” operates, allowing readers to reason from partial evidence to general conclusions that carry just as much authority as if they had syllogistically proven every intermediate step. The convert who, having assented to the authority of Catholicism because she has pursued the implications of her certitude, may not understand or even be aware of many of the specific doctrines that such a belief entails, but this does not matter: having proclaimed a belief in the “‘One Holy and Apostolic Church’ . . . an article, which, inclusive of her infallibility, all . . . can easily master and accept with a real and operative assent,” it follows that she can assent even to what she cannot understand, because she believes in the Church (Grammar 113).

But the implications of Newman’s philosophical theology extend even further, for his “illative sense” is irreducibly personal. She who acts in accord with it is on the one hand merely obeying the law of her nature, and there is simply no gainsaying its existence or reliability: “We are what we are, and we use, not trust our faculties. To debate about trusting in a case like this, is parallel to the confusion implied in wishing I had had a choice if I would be created or no, or speculating what I should be like, if I were born of other parents” (Grammar 47). Yet there is a further criterion that confirms the certitudes of the illative sense: complexity. In an astonishing passage, Newman argues that the very complexity—even the apparent self-contradiction—of the Catholic Church proves its truth:

There is a religious communion claiming a divine commission, and holding all other bodies around it heretical or infidel; it is a well-organized,

the principle that Scripture was the rule of faith and that a man’s private judgment was its rule of interpretation, and finding that the doctrine of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds did not follow by logical necessity from the text of Scripture, he said to himself, ‘The word of God has been made of none [sic] effect by the traditions of men, and therefore nothing was left for him to profess what he considered primitive Christianity, and to become a Humanitarian. The third gradually subsided into infidelity, because he started with the Protestant dogma, cherished in the depths of his nature, that a priesthood was a corruption of the simplicity of the Gospel. . . . then came the question, what after all was the use of teachers of religion? why should anyone stand between him and his Maker? . . . [S]o he came to the conclusion that the true and only revelation of God to man is that which is written on the heart. This did for a time . . . [b]ut then it occurred to him that this moral law was there within the breast, whether there was a God or not, and that it was a roundabout way of enforcing that law, to say that it came from God, and simply unnecessary, considering it carried with it its own sacred and sovereign authority, as our feelings instinctively testified . . . so he dropped it, and became a purus, putus Atheist.

“Now the world will say that in these three cases old certitudes were lost, and new were gained; but it is not so: each of the three men started with just one certitude, as he would have himself professed, had he examined himself narrowly; and he carried it out and carried it with him into a new system of belief. He was true to that one conviction from first to last [. . .] He has indeed made serious additions to his initial ruling principle, but he has lost no conviction of which he was originally possessed” (Grammar 186–87).
well disciplined body; it is a sort of secret society, binding together its members by influences and by engagements which it is difficult for strangers to ascertain. It is spread over the known world; it may be weak or insignificant locally, but it is strong on the whole from its continuity; it may be smaller than all other religious bodies together, but it is larger than each separately. It is a natural enemy to governments external to itself; it is intolerant and engrossing, and tends to a new modeling of society; it breaks laws, it divides families. It is a gross superstition: it is charged with the foulest crimes; it is despised by the intellect of the day; it is frightful to the imagination of many. And there is but one communion such.

Place this description before Pliny or Julian; place it before Frederick the Second or Guizot. “Apparent dirae facies.” Each knows at once, without asking a question, who is meant by it. One object, and only one, absorbs each item of the detail of the delineation. (Development 192–93)

This complexity, moreover, is grasped as a totality, and it is only once this totality is imaginatively apprehended that any kind of “local” effort to distinguish between its true and false aspects can make sense at all. As Stephen Prickett puts it,

For Newman . . . the true analogy of the Church is not a grain of mustard-seed, nor yet a vine, but a sentient human being—and preferably, indeed, one who had been educated at Oxford through the controversies of the 1820s and 1830s, and had held a fellowship at Oriel. . . . How are we, finally, to distinguish between the living body and the vain enchantments of simulacra? The true story and the false? Beyond the application of rule-of-thumb tests, the final answer appears to be by means of the imagination. This is the reason for the apparent circularity of the argument of the Essay. It is only after our imaginations have intuitively grasped the whole picture that such tests will serve to convince us. (175, 176)

It follows that the richer one’s imaginative capacity, the “truer” one’s perceptions and beliefs should be, and that the index of their “truth” would be their complexity. And it is no great leap to conclude that the very distinction between reality and dream—the opposition that frames Spark’s novel—becomes meaningless viewed from the standpoint of this all-encompassing imaginative truth. Spark’s own frequently quoted statement, “I don’t claim that my novels are truth—I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges” (qtd. in Kermode 30) takes on a greater resonance in light of Newman’s framework. So does her insistence that “Nobody can deny I speak with my own voice as a writer now, because before my conversion I was never sure what I was” (“My Conversion” 26).
Although Newman is not mentioned in Reality and Dreams, his account of the self offers a model for how Tom’s references to religion function in the text—as a display of imaginative, contradictory richness that mark him not just as a believer (and so in touch with the truth) but as the best kind of believer. Unlike the rote beliefs of those who have inherited their religion and feel little need to question it, Tom’s self-consciousness and even his playfulness about it imply, to invoke Newman’s language, a certitude reflected both in the authority with which he dispenses religious judgments and in his lack of seriousness about them. Even when Tom wonders whether he is a character in one of God’s dreams, the narrator takes pains to emphasize the paradoxical reality of such an idea: “To an unbeliever this would have meant the casting of an insubstantiality within an already insubstantial context. Tom was a believer. He meant the very opposite. Our dreams, yes, are insubstantial; the dreams of God, no. They are real, frighteningly real. They bulge with flesh, they drip with blood. My own dreams, said Tom to himself, are shadows, my arguments—all shadows” (63–64). This reality, in turn, casts a different light on his artistic production, his own meager attempts to play God. As long as he recognizes the shadowy nature of his dreams, without confusing them with reality (he is appropriately horrified when he remembers after his operation his drug-induced plans to have Claire murdered, and contents himself with having an “element of this scenario” [20] in the film script), his artistry remains praiseworthy. If he occasionally requires correction—such as a fall from a crane—we are nevertheless not invited to exult in his humiliation or to experience pity and fear in identifying with him.

V. The Nun and the Autobiographer:
Figures of the Artist in The Abbess of Crewe and Loitering with Intent

The deftness of Spark’s achievement in creating Tom becomes more evident if we compare him to two of his forebears—Alexandra, the Abbess of Crewe, and Fleur Talbot, the aspiring novelist of Loitering with Intent—whose very different personalities are combined and rendered more convincing in Tom. Though The Abbess of Crewe is among Spark’s most spirited performances—taking inspiration from Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” the Watergate break-in, and the often comical spectacle of factionalism in the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council—Alexandra herself is so grandiose as to be alternately lovable and creepy. Determined to remake the Abbey in light of her megalomaniacal vision, Alexandra manipulates the scandal that occurs when a nun’s thimble is stolen into a
drama that the engrosses the global media, all the while building a regime of surveillance—even the poplars of the nuns’ avenue are bugged—in her campaign against her rival, Sister Felicity. Alexandra’s transformation of the abbey is intended to maximize good taste and to minimize vulgar piety. Detesting no less than Caroline Rose the drabness of ordinary Catholics, Alexandra does not share her conviction that truth should trump style. Not only does she respond to the chants of the Liturgy of the Hours not with prayer but with poetry by Marvell and Keats; she reveals, in an address to the nuns, her aristocratic indifference to religious belief: “A Lady may secretly believe in nothing; but a Bourgeois [sic] invariably proclaims her belief, and believes in the wrong things. . . . A Lady is free; a Bourgeois is never free from the desire for freedom” (79, 80). Even at the level of material comforts, these differences are enforced: Alexandria and her henchmen enjoy pâté and white wine, while the despised ordinary nuns, ostensibly to mortify themselves, subsist on nettles and tinned cat food.

Much of the humor of *The Abbess of Crewe* derives from the way such pronouncements, impossible to take at face value, nevertheless provoke a kind of admiration in readers for their zany singularity and for the oblique light they shed on the context of the Catholic Church beyond the abbey walls. Alexandra’s innovations, for instance, satisfy neither traditionalists nor progressives in the tumultuous post–Vatican II context. As she puts it,

> “It is absurd in modern times that the nuns should have to get up twice in the middle of the night to sing the Matins and the Lauds. But modern times come into a historical context, and as far as I’m concerned history doesn’t work. Here, in the Abbey of Crewe, we have discarded history. We have entered the sphere, dear Sisters, of mythology. My nuns love it. Who doesn’t yearn to be part of a myth at whatever the price in comfort? The monastic system is in revolt throughout the rest of the world, thanks to historical development. Here, within the ambience of mythology, we have consummate satisfaction, we have peace.” (20)

As Edgecombe aptly notes, “It is almost impossible to disentangle the skeins of sympathy and mockery in the tone here” (97). One of the attractions of Christianity has always been its promulgation of a standard by which to judge the world. Yet while the appeal to something that stands above the vagaries of “historical context” makes sense, the Christian narrative must remain “historical” rather than merely “mythic” if it is to retain its integrity. Even as she makes such astonishing claims, however, she proves shrewd enough to detect lapses in orthodoxy in other nuns. When
the globe-trotting Sister Gertrude, modeled on Henry Kissinger, compromises Catholic doctrine in her efforts to preach to a group of “witch doctors” in the Congo, Alexandra pours scorn on her synthesizing, relativizing approach: “Sister Gertrude, believe me, is a philosopher at heart. There is a touch of Hegel, her compatriot, there” (20). In this way she manages to stand against both the historical relativism of post–Vatican II progressives and the “mythic” approach that would recommend results and “ambience” over dogma—a contradiction reconciled, if at all, only by the force of her singular charisma. Drawing from St. Paul and the heretical theology of Joachim of Fiore (with a possibly feminist twist) to justify her actions, Alexandra soars into antinomian ether:13 “The ages of the Father and the Son are past. We have entered the age of the Holy Ghost. The wind bloweth where it listeth and it listeth most certainly on the Abbey of Crewe. I am a Benedictine with the Benedictines, a Jesuit with the Jesuits. I was elected Abbess and I stay the Abbess and I move as the Spirit moves me” (5).

Spark plays out such appealing yet appalling zaniness as far as it can possibly go before yielding to verisimilitude. No abbess in the Catholic Church would be permitted such blasphemous eccentricities, and at the end of the novel Alexandra is en route to Rome to answer the charges against her. Echoing Shakespeare’s Tempest, the novel’s final paragraph hints at Alexandra’s almost-certain fate while indulging in one final paean to her glory: “Our revels now are ended. Be still, be watchful. She sails indeed on the fine day of her desire into waters exceptionally smooth, and stands on the upper deck, straight as a white ship’s funnel, marveling how the wide sea billows from shore to shore like that cornfield of sublimity which never should be reaped nor was ever sown, orient and immortal wheat” (116). John Updike’s judgment that “though the author cannot approve of the Abbess Alexandra, she does love her, love her as she hasn’t loved a character in a decade” (“Top-notch” 344) seems largely correct, and the proof is clinched when Alexandra, quoting Ezra Pound, declares her membership in Spark’s fraternity of artists and intellectuals: “For I am homesick after mine own kind / And ordinary people touch me not” (59).14

Alexandra surely exaggerates her artistic credentials to a degree that Spark herself, ever impressed by results instead of sentiments, would not—yet her fantasies are so beguiling that Spark is willing to give mostly free rein to them.

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13. Joachim of Fiore’s apocalyptic teaching of the “three ages” was condemned by the Church as heretical in 1263—a hint that Spark’s appeal to a more “intellectual” Catholicism that equates divine inspiration with aesthetic production might indeed flirt with heresy.

14. For two frustrated attempts to account for the discrepancy that Updike notes between disapproval and love, see Whittaker (103) and Edgecombe (93–110).
If Alexandra impresses but in the end must be let go as too implausible even for Spark, Fleur Talbot, the protagonist of *Loitering with Intent*, has more substance. Like Caroline Rose, Fleur is modeled largely on Spark herself as she scrounges to survive the British postwar world of austerity and seeks to make it as a writer “right in the middle of the twentieth century” (197). Like *The Comforters*, *Loitering with Intent* probes the relationship between fiction and autobiography: Fleur looks back to the time when she worked temporarily as a secretary for a motley but undistinguished crew of minor aristocrats and snobs who called themselves the “Autobiographical Association” and wished to write their life stories for the benefit of posterity. The stories are obviously not worth telling, and Fleur amuses herself by revising the narratives so as to make them more interesting. In the interval since then, Fleur has become a successful writer of novels, but *Loitering with Intent* purports to be autobiography: “[I]t strikes me how much easier it is with characters in a novel than in real life. In a novel the author invents characters and arranges them in convenient order. Now that I come to write biographically I have to tell of whatever actually happened and whoever naturally turns up” (59). By playing with readers who know the book to be fiction (albeit of an admittedly autobiographical cast), Spark flaunts her facility with both genres, and Fleur herself offers a naked appeal to the vanity of the book’s readers: “I always hope the readers of my novels are of good quality. I wouldn’t like to think of anyone cheap reading my books” (216).

Such self-conscious and skilled generic crossings are also commented upon in the text in ways that look to Newman for inspiration and carry implications for the role of Catholic belief in the life of a writer. Like Caroline Rose, Fleur despises vulgar piety even as she believes in Catholic doctrines; but like the Abbess of Alexandria, she refuses to mortify herself in the service of such beliefs: “I too was a Catholic believer but not that sort, not that sort at all. And if it was true . . . that I was taking terrible risks with my immortal soul, I would have been incapable of caution on those grounds. I had an art to practise and a life to live, and faith abounding; and I simply didn’t have the time or the mentality for guilds and indulgences, fasts and feasts and observances. I’ve never held it right to create more difficulties in matters of religion than already exist” (128–29). A partial justification for such attitudes may be gleaned from Fleur’s admiration for two biographies that complement each other: Newman’s *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and the *Life* of Benvenuto Cellini. Cellini’s rollicking narrative hints at the full range of license permitted to the writer, while Newman, accepting complexity, particularity, and even apparent contradiction, nevertheless provides continuous grounding for this license in the securely personal relationship with God.
Bryan Cheyette has argued that in *Loitering with Intent*, Spark retreats from her earlier admiration of Newman. The key passage from the *Apologia* that Fleur cites deals with Newman’s religious feelings as a boy, when he “mistrust[ed] . . . the reality of material phenomena” and “rest[ed] in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.” Struck by this passage after she has recommended the *Apologia* to a member of the Autobiographical Association, Fleur comes to perceive an “awful madness” (95) in this apparent solipsism, though her initial resentment springs from the fact that her interlocutor likes the passage despite the fact that she, unlike Fleur, has not spent three and a half years studying Newman, “at the sacrifice of pleasures and happiness which would never come my way again” (95). Skipping over Fleur’s petulance here, Cheyette comments: “While Newman unites his youthful and matured selves through his ‘neurotic’ (*Loitering* 96) relationship with God, Cellini is ‘comically contradictory’ (*Loitering* 124), recognizing a range of possible selves. Fleur, in the end, rejects the ‘awful madness’ (*Loitering* 95) inherent in Newman’s homogenizing narrative” (108). This is a distortion of Newman’s account of the self, which is capacious enough (as I have already suggested) to embrace the “comically contradictory.” It is revealing that Cheyette’s own language trips him up, for he at once criticizes Newman for “unit[ing] his youthful and matured selves” and lauds Spark for being “on the side of unification or desegregation” and seeing “a split self as untenable” (102). What’s the difference? Moreover, he does not acknowledge that Fleur, retreating almost at once from her own petulance, concedes that her characterization of the *Apologia* as “a beautiful piece of poetic paranoia” is “over-simple, a distortion” (96). She then continues to refer to the text as “lovely” (195), and when she places a passage from it alongside Cellini’s *Life* at the end of the novel, “admiring both” (196), the two autobiographies are revealed not as opposed to each other but as complementary. The phrase “from there by the grace of God I go on my way rejoicing” (217), which ends the novel, gives Cellini the last word but does not thereby diminish her admiration for Newman.

VI. Religion against Moralism in *Reality and Dreams*

Although I judge *Reality and Dreams* as a novel to be inferior to *Loitering with Intent*, its portrait of Tom provides in some respects the most convincing portrait of Spark’s romance with “really intelligent people,” the artists with whom she identifies and whose beliefs she recommends to her readers. Lacking the Abbess Alexandria’s zaniness, Tom shares her conviction
of self-worth; possessing the shrewdness and common sense of Fleur Talbot, Tom nonetheless shows that artists need not prove their credentials through poverty in postwar London. Like his compatriots, Tom has an imaginative literary sensibility (as his friendships with great writers and his frequent musings on T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” indicate) and an exalted, even grandiose conception of his creativity. In a novel in which redundancy (in American parlance, being laid off) is a major motif—and in which Tom is himself briefly made “redundant” when his injuries prevent him from directing his own film—he has no sympathy for those in this predicament, maintaining that “Nobody fires a man if he is exceptionally good, unless the whole outfit closes down” (21) and that artists are by definition not redundant: “No work of art can be replaced. A work of art is like living people” (23). Like them, he is a religious believer, but one who is unrepentant about his sins (above all, his frequent adulteries), and whose own theological pronouncements, however confidently delivered, are questionable—as when he tells Dave, his deeply religious taxi driver and confidant, “The Bible doesn’t teach Christian beliefs. It only illustrates them. The Bible came before Christianity by hundreds of years” (66).

The catalog of admirable traits continues: Tom accepts the intermingling of spirit and matter in a way that might be called sacramental—as when he tells his masseur that the two are “[a]t least, interdependent” (55). He overcomes several obstacles to his work, including not just his injuries and a series of delays in filming, but also two attempts on his life. And as with the Abbess and Fleur, there is virtually no hint that the narrator disap-

15. In an interview with Martin McQuillan, Spark expanded on the theme of the redundancy in the novel: “The issue is to have a whole new philosophy of life where usefulness is questioned. . . . A lot of people do without having the problem of whether they’re useful or not. If it’s an economic problem, it can be solved by society being arranged in such a way that there’s enough for everybody. What one does with one’s time is said to be important because of this puritanical thing about having to work to be useful” (223). Here Spark associates work with Puritanism and utility in a way consistent with Tom’s remarks on redundancy. Human beings are irreplaceable, but this is so because they are like works of art, not because they are useful. To have one’s uselessness confirmed by being laid off is, both Tom and Spark suggest, no reason for despair. Those who do despair become easy targets for manipulative, puritanical do-gooders—at which point any possibility of sympathy for them ceases.

16. One obvious mark of Tom’s kinship with the Abbess of Crewe is his repetition of her Joachite theology: “I want some sign of inspiration. Do you know what inspiration is? It is the descent of the Holy Spirit. I was talking to a Cardinal the other day. He said there was a theory that the ages of the Father and the Son were over and we were approaching the age of the Holy Spirit, or as we used to say, Ghost. The century is old, very old” (59). In both novels, however amusingly grandiose these pronouncements, there is little to suggest that they are intended ironically—that the Abbess and Tom are not, in fact, “inspired” in a sense that conflates the theological with the aesthetic.
proves of him. Even when the narrator appears to introduce doubt about him—“[W]ho was to say that he was the just arbiter of other people’s character?”—she immediately qualifies it in ways that redound to his credit: “Simply because he was always ready to assume that part, and others only too ready to listen to him with dazzled conviction is not to say that Tom was always right (although generally there was something in what he said)” (33). He is innately talented, aesthetically sensitive, and capable of weaving any complexity and uncertainty—even the limits on his own powers—into a satisfying whole. His preoccupation with J. Alfred Prufrock may suggest, as Anna Walczuk would have it, that he is “unable to find a definite verbal formula for everything that bothers and fascinates him in life” (96), but although he acknowledges such hesitations (and even releases *The Hamburger Girl* under the title *Unfinished Business*), he nevertheless succeeds, as Eliot does, in making such confusion into genuine art. He is, in short, just the kind of protagonist whom avowedly postmodern intellectuals, suspicious of theological discourse but deeply invested in their own status as right-thinking and creative individuals, would admire.

What makes his religious belief attractive to such an audience—as opposed to merely an eccentricity that can be taken or left—is not only the fun to be had with it but also its implicit opposition to moralism, embodied in the novel by his daughter, Marigold. Described early in the novel as (by Tom) an “unfrocked priest of a woman” (11) and later (by the narrator) as “worthy as any woman or man in the works of George Eliot, unlovely, graceless” (34) and still later as “[h]ideous” and “[a]lways negative” (87), Marigold functions throughout the novel as a malignant force, full of righteous but—as the narrator continually insists—unjustified anger. When she complains to Claire that Tom is cheating on her, she is astonished when Claire declares that the subject “bores” her and that she has no intention of divorcing him (62). She also likes to make sarcastic remarks about Tom’s wealth, but the narrator immediately ironizes them: “you must not imagine Marigold was particularly deprived” (12). When Tom and Claire wonder whether they are responsible for Marigold’s negativity, the narrator reassures us: “[T]hey were in no wise to blame. Marigold was simply a natural disaster” (90). And again: “How had Tom managed to conceive her? And Claire, so emotionally creative?” (34). “In no way could she be explained” (87).

As Tom reflects, what makes Marigold particularly unpleasant is the fact that “[s]ooner or later . . . [she] had to make it out to be a moral question” (54), irrespective of what “it” is. She describes moral deliberation as “see[ing] things *sub specie aeternitatis*” (making herself pedantic by adding, “Which means . . . ‘under the light of eternity’” [37]), and when Tom is not
actively appalled by her attitude, he finds it “too serious” (33). Much of her moral energy is directed against what she regards as the evils of redundancy, and she spends several memorable sequences pontificating not just against the cruelty of making people redundant, but also against luxury in general: “[N]o body should take on responsibilities which would demand more expenditure than would be gained from the dole and the income support schemes. . . . In other words, if all lived austerely, redundancy would bring no shock to the person or the family” (34). As Spark has suggested, Marigold’s interest in redundancy is meant to be seen as unhealthy. Eventually she disappears, leading Tom and Claire to worry that she might have been murdered, only to be discovered later disguised as a homeless man on a campsite in Gloucestershire, “living like this,” as she explains, “in order to experience at first hand what it’s like to be destitute. . . . Few realize what redundancy can lead to” (136). Although Claire, after speaking with her, is convinced that “she means every word” (137), the novel also implies that she is equally driven by a desire to make Tom feel guilty and to manipulate him—as when she briefly hides with a temporary and unnamed lover on the campsite in France that had inspired *The Hamburger Girl*, having had a (confirmed) hunch that Tom will search there for her (101). There is also the possibility—neither confirmed nor denied in the text—that while in hiding Marigold has persuaded Kevin Woodstock, a redundant television director with whose wife Tom has been having an affair, to assassinate Tom (the bullet instead hits Dave, nearly killing him). At no point is there any indication that Marigold shares her father’s religious beliefs, which suggests that when religion disappears, an unattractive and even murderous moralism replaces it.

Marigold does, to be sure, display her own kind of creativity—passing as a homeless man, becoming a national figure, and writing *Out of Work in a Camper*, which becomes a bestseller. Tom, who initially finds her own attempt at filmmaking (on redundancy) laughable (“Tom and Claire hurled themselves about the sofa in their hilarity” [86]), later considers that her book gives her “a glamour which [he] could only admire” and concludes that she is “more ambitious” than he (141). Even so, he finds ways to make use of Marigold’s talents for his own purposes, casting her as a “hermaphroditic Celt of the years c. 436” who foresees the future in his next film, *Watling Street* (140). In doing so, he again suggests the priority of the aes-

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17. “That’s one of the things I wanted to bring out in the book, this frustration people have about redundancy. There’s this awful girl, Marigold, a sort of social worker, working up this feeling at the same time” (“The Same” 223). Spark implies that frustration at redundancy is unwarranted, and that those who exploit such feelings—whether from a sincere desire to help or not—cause more harm than good.
thetic over the moral, the imaginative over the factual, and angers her all over again: “It was often said privately that her disappearance had been a publicity stunt to work up interest in Watling Street. And when this was suggested publicly on a talk-show, she denied it vehemently. Her experiences were real sufferings, she explained” (141). “Real” they may have been, but even her newly acquired celebrity cannot hide the aesthetic flaws of their presentation, as Claire eventually suggests upon learning of her plans for a second book on redundancy: “I hope she gets a better ghost-writer this time” (147). Her murderousness, doubtful earlier in the novel, is confirmed when she encourages Jeanne (the actress who plays the hamburger girl, and who has her own grievances against Tom) to tamper with his crane a second time.

In the novel’s final chapter, Tom tells his crew, “What we are doing . . . is real and not real. We are living in a world where dreams are reality and reality is dreams. In our world everything starts from a dream” (157). Working, like Spark, on a fiction from which a kind of truth emerges, Tom’s aesthetic position has now earned a certain authority and can be seen, like Newman’s, as a matter of imaginative, personal connection to truth. It almost seems a foregone conclusion that instead of killing Tom, Jeanne falls to her death from the crane, while Marigold flees to the United States. Tom, shaken by his latest brush with death, ends the novel with Claire’s “strength and courage sustaining [him], here in the tract of no-man’s land between dreams and reality, reality and dreams” (160).

VII. The Nature of Sparkian Irony

In recent years, it has become common to speak of Spark’s novels as postmodern—no doubt because of their metafictive properties and their flouting of conventional readerly pleasures. Yet the most familiar definition of the postmodern—Jean-François Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), which finds an even more extreme embodiment in Richard Rorty’s figure of the “liberal ironist” (Contingency xv)—does not convincingly apply to Spark, despite the attempts of some contemporary critics to invoke something like it in connection with her. Bryan Cheyette, for instance, argues that Spark places “a sense of history, tradition, and the avant-garde next to an irreverent and whimsical sense of the absurdity of all human philosophies” (10), that her work amounts to a continuous demystification of anything that would propose itself as true or binding.

I hope to have shown that for all the playfulness of Reality and Dreams, this novel does commit to certain nonnegotiable and binding values, explic-
itly aesthetic and implicitly religious. What saves these values from formula is not their nonnegotiability but their particular relation to irony, which has little in common with the thought of Lyotard or Rorty. Stephen Prickett observes that in such versions of postmodernism, “There is no hidden meaning to be implicitly drawn on, because there is . . . nothing to be hidden. There can be no implicit conflict between various versions of reality; there can be no gap between what is asserted and what we all know to be true; all is surface, there is no depth” (204). For Prickett, Rorty counts as a “fundamentalist” (204) precisely because he “knows,” in advance, that there can be no relationship whatsoever between language and whatever “bedrock reality” might exist outside of it (203). Such a position leaves nothing meaningful to be said and has no use for persuasion in good faith; it also misunderstands what literature is, because “a novel that is unrelated to any unrecognizable truth at all is boring, if not downright unreadable” (205). A genuine ironist, by contrast, recognizes that the relationship between words and things “is neither constant, nor contingent, but essentially unstable” (257). Spark suggests that perhaps only in God is a bridge between narrative and thing possible—as in Tom Richards’s notion that God’s dreams bulge and bleed—but artists and religious converts construct their own imperfect bridges, “dreams” that nevertheless partake of (though never coinciding with) “reality.” There is an element of determinism in such a vision, for those gifted with artistic vision or religious faith are best suited to build these bridges. But within this determinist framework, such people are also genuinely free—free from aesthetic or moralizing convention, and free to bring new and irreplaceable objects into the world that gesture toward truth. They also live comfortably with contradiction.

For all the richness of Spark’s Catholic irony, there are two obvious risks that it runs. The first is that its appeal to an intellectual audience might descend into what Booth calls “disguised expressions of snobbery which would never be tolerated if expressed openly in commentary” (391). The second is the distortion of Catholic doctrine in the service of such an appeal. If there is a hint of unseemly arrogance in Spark’s self-identification with “really intelligent people,” there is also the danger that contradiction will become something not merely to be lived with but even celebrated. There is no necessary contradiction, for instance, between Tom’s sincere religious belief and his adulteries in Reality and Dreams—but while he does not (as he says that Greene did) avow that many sexual partners are essential for his work, he is forthright enough about the usual pattern of his affairs to suggest that he feels no guilt about them. To the extent that Spark’s work does suggest that Catholic morality may be neatly demarcated from Catholic belief and rendered optional—especially
among practicing artists—it does indeed distort Catholic doctrine and comes to resemble the “once saved, always saved” position of some Protestant denominations. If the orthodox position that adultery is under all circumstances sinful remains discernible as the norm from which Spark’s vision departs—and in Reality and Dreams it is present in the figure of the “biblically religious married” taxi driver Dave, who enjoys Tom’s “religious reflections” and finds himself “in full sympathetic understanding” with him (64)—it is nevertheless presented as essentially boring. A cynical reader might conclude that it is better for Dave to take the bullet that is intended for Tom—had Dave been killed, it would be no great loss and he would have his reward, but had Tom been killed, there would have been no more of his films. This is indeed, as Booth would fear, snobbery.

The question of whether such a presentation would appeal to Spark’s intended audience, however, is a separate issue, and here her rhetorical skill seems certain and surprisingly timely. Indeed, as contemporary intellectuals have begun to observe that secularization may not be the irreversible and inevitable process that it once seemed, the pluralistic condition of postmodernity has become “a supreme opportunity” (Milbank 1) for some to assert the Christian story anew, in all its radical claim to truth. By combining the aesthetic strategies of postmodernism with the recognition that postmodern theories rooted in the centrality of language are increasingly untenable, Spark’s fiction speaks to—though does not necessarily endorse—the arguments of recent thinkers as different as John Milbank, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and Peter Augustine Lawler.18 Moreover, her finessing of the freedom/determinism binary appeals to thinkers who have seen subversion instead of blows for freedom as the surest way to engage with (and perhaps even to enjoy) one’s own embeddedness in a larger system. Catholicism in Spark comes across not as a system of moral injunctions but as an aesthetic of freedom, experienced as a complex personal discipline that colors all of life. If it also happens to be true, so much the better.

All of which suggests both why Spark’s fiction is uniquely positioned to speak to current arguments about religion in the twenty-first century and why she lags behind O’Connor in popularity among critics and ordinary readers. O’Connor does not count as a “fundamentalist” in Prickett’s sense of the word, but her commitment to the existential urgency of whether to

18. I have in mind here Milbank’s project of “radical orthodoxy,” Lawler’s reinterpretation of postmodernism as a “return to realism,” and Harpham’s argument that there is no such thing as “language alone”—that is, that theories purporting to treat of language in itself surreptitiously smuggle in all kinds of unacknowledged or unavowable assumptions, usually about the nature of human beings.
believe, with its undoubted emotional punch, is simply more compelling even to most intellectual readers than Spark’s more complex treatment of belief. From an orthodox standpoint, O’Connor’s position is more solid—not only because it distorts Christianity less but also because God is on the record as not being particularly fond of intellectuals. That Spark has identified with them, elected to appeal to them, and even fallen into what a strict accounting of Christian doctrine would acknowledge as theological error in this appeal only confirms the difficulty of her task. That she has undertaken it at all is admirable, for “really intelligent people” are people too.