Chapter 6
The Text as Interrogator: Muriel Spark and Job*

I

Muriel Spark's novel, *The Only Problem* (1984), is about a wealthy Canadian, Harvey Gotham, who has sequestered himself in a simple cottage in the Vosges in order to write a monograph on the Book of Job.

This sends the reader at once to the bookshelf for a copy of the Old Testament. But will he get much good of it? The idea is that here we have a text by Muriel Spark which explicitly claims some kind of relationship with a biblical text. We are now thoroughly accustomed to the idea that texts are meditations, transforming, re-ordering, decomposing, etc., upon other texts, and though one is not supposed to say that the texts involved in such relations of parasitism 'throw light upon' one another, a faint hope, not yet reconciled to the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with the notion of light upon which such hopes depend, tempts us to imagine that here it might be so.

But what light can come from joke and enigma? *The Only Problem* is as 'Bristling with mysteries', as 'wickedly delicious' as the blurb-writer tells us it is, hinting thereby, I take it, that beyond noting that the prose seemed pretty crisp and witty he couldn't actually make a great deal of it. While Job, to which the reader turns for whatever enlightenment he still expects to receive, is of course widely credited with being the most puzzling book of the OT.

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Job is frequently taken to be about the Problem of Evil; that is to say, to address the question of what the believer is to make of the following inconsistent triad of propositions:

God is omnipotent.
God is good (merciful, just, etc.).
Suffering exists.

The believer wishes to affirm the first two; the third he can hardly deny. But he cannot consistently affirm all three at once. One or more of them must be false, but, and here is the rub, whichever of them is false it is clearly not going to be the third.

This is the problem to which Harvey Gotham takes the Book of Job to be addressed, and which is for him The Only Problem.

> .... he could not face that a benevolent Creator, one whose charming and delicious light descended and spread over the world, and being powerful everywhere, could condone the unspeakable sufferings of the world; that God did permit all suffering and was therefore, by logic of his omnipotence, the actual author of it, he was at a loss how to square with the existence of God, given the premise that God is Good.

'It is the only problem', Harvey had always said. Now, Harvey believed in God, and this is what tormented him. 'It's the only problem, in fact, worth discussing' (p. 19).[1]

But, notoriously, the Book of Job offers no clear answer to this question. 'Surely I would speak to the Almighty, And I desire to reason with God', says Job (13:3). And his wish is granted. But when God finally speaks it is, seemingly, to dismiss with contempt the idea that Job's sufferings deserve explanation, let alone apology. 'Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? / Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.' And there follows what appears to be merely a blank assertion of divine omnipotence, 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?' (38:2–4), and an extended hymn of praise to the glories and mystery of the Creation. This surely begs the *moral* question. But, mysteriously, Job himself accepts it as an answer. 'I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.... I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: But now mine eye seeth thee. / Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes' (42:2–6).

Many honest people, and not just village atheists, find this revolting. If God's answer to the suffering, moral and natural, of the world is that we should be content to grovel before Him and forget about it, then perhaps such a god should not be worshipped. The believer who continues to affirm God's omnipotence and goodness begins, under

this light, to look a little like Job himself: a grovelling, power-worshipping sycophant content, perhaps, not only to waive his own sufferings, but to ignore or minimize those of other people, provided he can bask in the charismatic presence of his omnipotent Leader.

This would be a perfectly sound way of debunking the claims of the Book of Job to 'mystery' or 'profundity', if it were not that the text continues beyond this point. Having downed Job, the Lord rounds on the comforters.

> ... the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath. / Therefore ... go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job. (42:7–8)

What 'my servant Job' has been doing all along is to contend stoutly that he has done nothing to *deserve* the loss of his herds, the deaths of his children and his affliction of boils. Eliphaz and his two friends have been arguing equally passionately that for Job to stick in this way to what he perceives as the moral truth of the matter is in itself an act of impiety. It is they who argue that Job should adopt an attitude of abject submission to the inscrutability of God's will and condemn himself for no reason apparent to him: whatever the evidence to the contrary, if God is punishing him in this way He *must* be unjust. A fifth speaker, Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, angry at the failure of the comforters to convince Job of his unworthiness, states the nub of their objection to Job's conduct. His obstinacy in cleaving to the truth of his own moral perceptions is an implied affront to their own righteousness, and the right which it should confer upon them to interpret God's intentions to him.

Elihu is not afraid to present himself to Job as God's representative, confirmed in that role by his righteousness.

> My words shall be of the uprightness of my heart: and my lips shall utter knowledge clearly. / The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life. / If thou canst answer me, set thy words in order before me, stand up. / Behold I am according to thy wish in God's stead: I also am formed out of the clay. (33:3–6)

And, of course, there is a certain impious presumption in this stand itself, so that later, when Elihu rebukes Job's alleged impiety thus, 'Thinkest thou this to be right, that thou saidst, My righteousness

is more than God's? / For thou saidst, What advantage will it be unto thee? and, What profit shall I have, if I be cleansed from my sin?' (35:2–3); it is unclear whether the alleged insult is to God's righteousness or to Elihu's, and beyond him to the validity of the accepted institutions for detecting and cleansing sin.

'I'm analysing the God of Job, as I say', writes Harvey to Edward late in the Spark novel. 'We are back to the Inscrutable. If the answers are valid then it is the questions that are all cock-eyed' (p. 180). If we construe the Book of Job backward from God's acceptance of Job and rejection of the comforters, rather than forward from the fact of Job's suffering, is it so clear that the poem is addressing itself to the Problem of Evil? Is it so clear that that is The Only Problem?

Perhaps because of the deep and lasting influence of utilitarianism, suffering has taken on a peculiar centrality in our moral thinking. It is reasonable to think that suffering, though it is sometimes valuable, is often meaningless, and sometimes appalling in its meaninglessness. What we tend to believe, however, is that suffering is not merely often but always and intrinsically bad: more, that it is that which is primarily bad, in the sense that only by partaking in it, or by a causal connection with it, do other things become bad. We like to think that it is the perception of the badness of suffering *per se*, and the consequent endeavour to remove it wholly from human life, that sets our morality in motion, gets us moving, as it were, as moral beings.

If we look closely at the Book of Job, however, we find that this familiar but rather recently invented point of view is shared by none of the characters. What the poem is grappling with is not the possibility that God does not care about suffering, construed as always and intrinsically an evil, but that He does not care about our *deserts*. Job, for instance, does not think suffering in itself a ground for reproaching God. When his wife says to him, 'Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die', he replies. 'Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?' (2:9–10). What is foolish is presumably precisely the idea that suffering can be wholly removed from life: that the goods of the kind of life we enjoy here could be had without any correlative evils.

What Job himself cannot stand is the apparent injustice of his sufferings.

> My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death; / Not for any injustice in mine hands: also my prayer is pure. / O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place. / Also now,

> behold, my witness is in heaven, and my record is on high. / My friends scorn me: but mine eye poureth out tears unto God. / O that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleadeth for his neighbour! / When a few years are come, then I shall go the way whence I shall not return. (16:16–22)

Even now, however, Job is so far from ceasing to trust in the eternity of God's justice and truth that he appeals to heaven to justify him: 'my record is on high'. What if God keeps no records, perhaps because He does not exist? Well, then, we shall have to rely for our ideas of what is just and unjust on the comforters, or in other words upon the social construction of reality, including moral reality.

The comforters seem, by the present-day standards I mentioned a moment ago, grossly callous. They impute no moral significance to suffering *in itself*. They seem to feel no temptation to take Job's suffering as constituting, just *qua* suffering, a reproach to their comparative ease and prosperity. They lack altogether our tendency to speak in hushed voices in the presence of suffering: to treat it as something intrinsically deserving of respect.

Job's complaint against them, however, is not this. His complaint against them is that they will not claim fellowship with him, or involve themselves in his sufferings, as one might involve oneself in the sufferings of someone one loved. They will not plead for him with God, 'as a man pleadeth for his neighbour'.

> And Job answered and said, / No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you. / But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these? / I am as one mocked of his neighbour. . . . (12:1–4)

Not unnaturally, he prefers to take his chance with God.

> Hold your peace, let me alone, that I may speak, and let come on me what will. / Wherefore do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in mine hand? / Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him. / He also shall be my salvation: for an hypocrite shall not come before him. (13:13–16)

This stance, of course, is exactly what irritates the comforters. Their moral theology is what justifies them; by its light they are righteous men, entitled by their righteousness to rebuke and exhort Job. That Job refuses to play this game is thus felt as a personal assault upon them.

> Then answered Bildad the Shuhite and said, / How long will it be ere ye make an end of words? Mark, and afterwards we will speak. / Wherefore

> are we counted as beasts, and reputed vile in your sight? / He teareth himself in his anger: shall the earth be forsaken for thee? (18:1–4)

God speaks, however, and the roles are reversed. The comforters, who would not plead for Job, 'as a man pleadeth for his neighbour', are now made dependent upon his pleading: only after they have sacrificed before Job, and Job has prayed for them, will they be acceptable to God. When Job has prayed for his friends, doing for them the office which they denied him, his 'captivity is turned', he becomes twice as prosperous as before and has seven sons and three daughters, the third of whom is quaintly named Keren-happuch, 'Box of Eye-Paint'.

I have been emphasizing, of course, those elements of Job which make it into something like a comedy of manners, about righteousness and its relation to social status and to reality, including the reality of suffering and the reality of other people as individuals. Out of these elements, I shall suggest, Muriel Spark has made *her* comedy of manners. But such a reading of Job, although by no means a very original or strained one, does put the thundering speech of God in chapters 38–41 in a somewhat different light, in two respects. First, God's blank reaffirmation of His originating power, which can seem like mockery of Job ('I made the world, and you: be content with it') can also appear as a genuine reassurance: 'I made the world and *it is real*: truth and falsity mean something, in the sense of being beyond human wishes and conventions: there is, after all, a record on high'. Second, there is the peculiar delight that the God of the poet of Job takes in His creation: a delight that seems to shine through and past all suffering. I shall come back to that in a moment.

II

Harvey Gotham has deserted his wife, Effie. On holiday Effie gets out of the car at a service station to buy two bars of chocolate. Later it turns out she has stolen these, as a measure of proletarian redistribution and a way of striking back at the multinationals. Effie at that time is extremely rich, on Harvey's money. Harvey, on learning that the chocolate was stolen, pulls in a little further down the *autostrada* and leaves the car, ostensibly to pee, actually to hitch a lift on a truck. He simply decamps, leaving Effie with the apartment, his personal belongings and the bills. The reason he offers later is that he could no longer stand the sketchiness and subjectivity of the political moralizing she goes in for. Harvey retires to a cottage near Epinal in the Vosges and immerses himself in the Book of Job. Effie becomes a

terrorist, robs supermarkets and banks, involves Harvey in an investigation of his activities by the police and the international press, kills a policeman in Paris and is finally herself shot by the police at the scene of a second hold-up.

What has all this to do with the Book of Job? Consider, first, how close, in one way, Effie's moral universe is to that of the comforters. The world of the comforters' moral vision is populated exclusively by the righteous and the reprobate: the role of God is simply to exalt the one and cast down the other. The central moral concepts are desert, justice, reward, retribution. What stinks morally, what cries out for action to restore the moral balance of the universe, is not suffering but the unrebuked prosperity of the wicked; and the action called for is not action to alleviate suffering, but a retributive outpouring of suffering upon the heads of the unrighteous, who work iniquity.

Eliphaz the Temanite and his friends are content to leave the chastisement of the wicked in the hands of God. But suppose someone who shares their moral outlook comes to believe that God is dead. Will he or she conclude that 'everything is permitted': that the distinction between righteous and unrighteous has no basis in reality? Perhaps; but why should he? Will not the unpunished luxury of the wicked stink in his nostrils just as much as before? If God is dead, is it not better, perhaps, that men should take on the divine role of agent of wrath, rather than that the wicked should continue to rejoice in their prosperity? Someone who thinks like this will no longer be able to claim a theological basis for the distinction between righteousness and unrighteousness, of course, but he or she can just as easily found it upon a political outlook, which need only be quite sketchily developed as a body of ideas and analysis; enough to confuse opponents and satisfy doubters.

The point is that once such a person has founded the distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous in some such way, any action he or she undertakes in his or her capacity of agent of wrath against the unrighteous will be morally justified simply on the grounds that the unrighteous *are* the unrighteous, and so deserve all they get. In this way we arrive at the moral consciousness of Effie, of whom Harvey says,

> 'I couldn't stand her sociological clap-trap. If she wanted to do some good in the world she had plenty of opportunity. There was nothing to stop her taking up charities and causes; she could have had money for them, and she always had plenty of time. But she has to rob supermarkets and banks and sleep with people like *that*.' He pointed to a row of photographs in the paper. (p. 124)

Harvey hasn't much time for justice as a self-authenticating moral imperative.

> 'A matter of justice. A balancing of accounts.' This is how Ruth put it to Harvey. 'I'm passionate about justice,' she said.
>
> 'People who want justice', Harvey said, 'generally want so little when it comes to the actuality. There is more to be had from the world than a balancing of accounts.'
>
> She supposed he was thinking of his character Job, as in fact he was. (p. 42)

But this doesn't mean that Harvey is not himself a painfully moral man: it is just that, like Job, he likes to stick in his moralizings strictly to the facts as they appear to him. With him it is actuality first, justice second.

Like Job, Harvey has his comforters. Indeed almost every other character in the book seems dominated by the desire to accuse Harvey of something, to dig out the root of his wickedness. And, as in the Book of Job, many of these accusations seem to have in them more of moral enthusiasm than of fidelity to fact or logic. Ruth, Effie's sister, is a case in point. Ruth is 'passionate about justice', but the style of argument by which she goes about establishing the justice of any actual moral claim is just one long *non sequitur*. Effie, after leaving Harvey, has a baby, Clara, by Ernie Howe, a computer expert. When, predictably, she leaves Howe, she settles the child on Ruth, now also divorced from her ex-curate actor husband Edward. Ruth decides in turn to go and settle both the baby and herself on Harvey. To the reader, who has been made privy to Ruth's attempt to blackmail Effie, through knowledge of her affairs, into sharing out some of Harvey's money by inviting herself and Edward, then still in his impoverished curate stage, on the ill-fated Italian holiday, and who has grasped also that Effie is the pretty, vivacious one, to whom men and affairs and money present no problem, the motives for Ruth's descent with Clara upon Effie's rich ex-husband seem simple enough. But to Ruth it is a matter of justice.

> 'It's a matter of justice,' Ruth said.
>
> 'How do you work that out?' said Nathan.
>
> 'Well, if it hadn't been for Harvey leaving Effie she would never have had a baby by Ernie,' Ruth said. 'Harvey should have given her a child. So Harvey's responsible for Clara; it's a question of justice, and with all his riches it would be the best thing if he could take responsibility, pay Effie her alimony. He might even take Effie back.'
>
> 'Effie doesn't want to go back to Harvey Gotham,' said Ernie.

'Harvey won't take her back,' Edward said. 'He believes that Effie boils down to money.'

'Alas, he's right,' said Ernie. (p. 41)

Ruth and Edward, both deeply conventional souls, use this kind of happy-go-lucky special pleading mainly to put a respectable gloss on what they propose to do anyway, and are not unaware of the resulting gap of credibility. Thus Edward, going to visit Harvey in his French cottage with the idea of getting him to agree to a profitable divorce settlement for Effie, wonders 'if there wasn't something of demonology in those confidences he shared with Ruth about Harvey; Ruth didn't know him as well as Edward did. They had certainly built up a case against Harvey between themselves which they wouldn't have aired openly.' (p. 10).

Edward finds Harvey difficult company, mainly because of an insistent, Job-like veracity which cuts Edward's actorly moral poses to ribbons.

> Edward used to confide in Harvey, and he in Edward, during their student life together. Harvey had never, to Edward's knowledge, broken any of these confidences in the sense of revealing them to other people; but he had a way of playing them back to Edward at inopportune moments.... So many sweet things seemed to have spilled out of his ears as soon as they entered them; so many of the sour and the sharp, the unripe and frivolously carping observations he made, Harvey had saved up in his memory-bank at compound interest; it seemed to Edward that he capitalized on these past confidences at a time when they were likely to have the most deflating effect on him; he called this a breach of confidence in a very special sense. (pp. 21–2)

The interview, not surprisingly, goes badly for Edward. Harvey concludes the discussion of Effie's affairs by giving Edward a sealed envelope to send to Harvey's lawyer when Edward gets back to England. Edward feels insulted by the fact that the envelope is sealed. When he arrives home he finds Ruth in the company of Nathan Fox, an ex-student who makes himself useful in their house, and who later ends up as one of Effie's terrorist accomplices.

Nathan's morality is happy-go-lucky in a more profound way than Ruth's and Edward's. 'Ruth', reflects Harvey at a later stage, is 'thoroughly bourgeois by nature; Effie anarchistic, aristocratic.' When she is told that she has gone off the rails, Effie says, 'What rails? Whose rails?' (p. 45). When she wants to get Harvey's address she has no compunction at all in doing it in a way which is both dishonest and lands an unsuspecting secretary in the soup. Nathan is

a chip off this block. Like Effie he knows that everyday morality is merely a delusive glare which hides a deeper and darker geometry of justice and retribution. So he plays with Ruth's and Edward's preposterous scruples in a way at once elegant and ingenious; and when they do finally steam the objectionable letter open it is because Nathan has deftly, with a nudge here and there, shown them how to square it with their consciences.

> ... Nathan seemed to serve them like a gentleman who takes a high hand in matters of form, or an unselfconscious angel. In a way, that is what he was there for, if he had to be there. He often said things out of his inexperience and cheerful ignorance that they themselves wanted to say but did not dare. (p. 36)

So far, then, we have the following schema: a man with a Job-like preference for sticking to the facts, flanked by representatives of two quite different styles of sloppy moral reasoning, each governed by the determination to reach certain conclusions come what may, in the face of the facts if need be; and each related, though in different ways, to the comforters' obsession with justice and divine vengeance, and to their comfortable occupancy of a closed system of moral beliefs and arguments which makes sense of their world and assures them of their own moral worth.

From this point the novel moves into deeper waters. Harvey, like Job in his rectitude and his regard for truth ('perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil'), is quite unlike him in other ways. For one thing he does not suffer very much. Harvey himself worries about this, and is inclined to put it down to his wealth. Nobody tells him anything: his lawyers do everything for him.

> How can you deal with the problem of suffering if everybody conspires to estrange you from suffering? He felt like the rich man in the parable: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for him to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. (p. 64)

When Ruth persuades him to buy the château in whose grounds his cottage-hermitage stands, the same curious spring of inverted self-pity wells over again: we see why he likes the cottage, which has so far at least served to estrange him from the visible tokens of his wealth. '"Instead of disabusing myself of worldly goods in order to enter the spirit of Job I seem to acquire more, ever more and more," was all that Harvey said' (p. 57).

But is wealth all that is wrong with Harvey? Others know better. Edward, for instance:

> And undoubtedly Harvey was often right. That he had a cold side was no doubt a personal matter. In Edward's view it wasn't incompatible with Harvey's extremely good mind and his occasional flashes of generosity. And indeed his moral judgement. Perhaps a bit too much moral judgement. (p. 22)

And bit by bit the fact of his own coldness begins to dawn on Harvey, either in the form of Freudian slips or outright pieces of self-analysis. The trouble is, he can't stand people, can't bear to pay attention to them, keeps wanting to get back to the solitude of his cottage and the puzzling moral geometry of Job.

> Ruth didn't notice, or affected not to notice, a look of empty desperation on Harvey's face; a pallor, a cornered look; his lips were parted, his eyes were focusing only on some anguished thought. And he was, in fact, suddenly aghast: What am I doing with these people around me? Who asked this fool to come and join us for Christmas? What do I need with Christmas, and Ruth, and a baby and a bloody little youth who needs a holiday? Why did I buy that château if not for Ruth and the baby to get out of my way? He looked at his writing table and panicked.
>
> 'I'm going out, I'll just fetch my coat,' he said, thumping upstairs two at a time. (p. 60)

But later he reflects, 'I can't hold these women, . . . Neither Effie nor Ruth. My mind isn't on them enough, and they resent it, just as I resent it when they put something else before me, a person, an idea. Yes, it's understandable.' (p. 62)

A quasi-feminist polarity is emerging, between the amoral women, who must be attended to, and the bracing rectitude of Harvey's moral intelligence, thoroughly masculine but a bit arid. It is no accident that the grass around Harvey's cottage is dry and wilting, while the grass at the château, full of women and a baby, is greener. Harvey obscurely puts his finger on the heart of this matter in conversation with Stewart, his lawyer.

> Stewert said, 'Lousy soil you've got here. Nothing much growing.'
> 'I haven't bothered to cultivate it.'
> 'It's better up at the château.'
> 'Oh, yes, it's had more attention.' (p. 127)

What Harvey prefers to attend to is the intellect, rectitude, the ethical. The reason why Job is such a torment to him is that it puts into the mouth of God words which deny the completeness, even the final validity, of such interests. Writes Harvey to Edward, 'I agree

that Job endlessly discusses morals but there is nothing moral about the Book of Job. In fact it is shockingly amoral' (p. 67).

This, I take it, is the source of most of the suffering that Harvey endures for most of the novel. It is the source of the air of anxiety Edward notes during his visit: 'Anxiety, suffering, were recorded in his face; that was certain. Edward wasn't sure that this was not self-induced' (p. 27).

What, in God's name, is God trying to tell Job? It is to Muriel Spark's credit that she offers a kind of answer to this ancient and troubling question, though not quite the kind of answer Harvey thinks he is after. It is something to do with the way in which the fact that the universe is real, a place of concrete individuals which can never be fully reduced to intellectual schemata, both mocks our moral consciousness, our rectitude, in so far as *it* is something intellectual and schematic, a matter of abstract justice and balance of sin and retribution, and at the same time invites it to transcend itself, to share in the creative joy of God as well as His justice.

III

Part Two of the novel opens with Ruth, Harvey and Effie's baby, Clara, at the château: all quiet. Suddenly, pandemonium. Effie and her gang rob a string of supermarkets near the château. Harvey is arrested as a possible suspect, his studious privacy shattered.

There follows a long period of interrogation of Harvey, by the police, who think he may be financing the terrorists, by the press, who think he is a religious maniac and have no doubt that he is financing the terrorists, and by his Canadian Aunt Pet, who thinks he may be bringing dishonour on the family name. In all this Harvey, like all inexperienced interrogatees, reveals most about himself when he takes himself to be being most cleverly evasive, and stumbles towards some kind of better understanding of himself.

The key to this part of the book is, I take it, the painting of *Job visité par sa femme*, by Georges de La Tour, in the museum at Epinal. Harvey is looking at this work, trying to fathom it, when the police come to arrest him. It is a lovely, intimate painting. Job sits naked with his potsherd looking up with a rather childlike expression of trust and distress. His wife, bending over him in a crimson dress and a broad white apron lovingly thrown into light and shadow by the wax candle she holds in her right hand, is addressing him with serious concern. Yet in the Book of Job Job's wife jeers at him. The painting puzzles Harvey, not least because of the striking physical resemblance between Effie, Ruth, and Job's wife in the picture.

> . . . what is she saying to him, Job's wife, in the serious, simple and tender portrait of Georges de La Tour? The text of the poem is full of impatience, anger; it is as if she is possessed by Satan. 'Dost thou still retain thine integrity?' She seems to gloat, 'Curse God and die'. Harvey recalled that one of the standard commentators had suggested a special interpretation, something to the effect, 'Are you still going to be so righteous? If you're going to die, curse God and get it off your chest first. It will do you good.' But even this, perhaps homely, advice doesn't fit in with the painting. Of course, the painter was idealizing some notion of his own; in his dream, Job and his wife are deeply in love. (p. 78)

As the police arrive, the unsuspecting Harvey continues to develop these thoughts. Job

> . . . doesn't call her a foolish woman, he rather implies that she isn't speaking as her normal self. And he puts it to her, 'Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?' That domestic 'we' is worth noticing, thought Harvey; he doesn't mean to abandon his wife, he has none of the hostility towards her that he has, later, for his friends. (ibid.)

That Job 'doesn't mean to abandon his wife', even if she does by his lights talk a little wildly and foolishly on moral and theological questions, is, I take it, the heart of the matter. For Harvey has abandoned his wife, on the *autostrada*, for doing just that; because he 'couldn't stand her sociological clap-trap'.

Inspector Chatelain, trying to gain Harvey's sympathy for the police in their efforts to trace Effie, graphically describes the effect of her latest murder on the victim's wife, incidentally putting strain on the comforter-like notion that desert is the bedrock of morals.

> 'If I was in your place,' said Chatelain, 'I would probably speak as you do. . . . I don't blame you for trying to protect your wife. You see,' he said, leaning back in his chair and looking away from Harvey, towards the window, 'a policeman has been shot dead. His wife is in a shop on the outskirts of Paris where they live, a popular quarter, with her twelve-year-old daughter who has a transistor radio. The lady is waiting her turn at the cash-desk. The child draws her mother's attention to a flash item of news that has interrupted the music. A policeman has been shot and killed in the eighteenth *arrondissement*. . . . Now this lady, the policeman's wife, is always worried when she hears of the death or wounding of a policeman. In this case the description is alarmingly close. . . . She hurries home and finds a police car outside her block of flats. It is indeed her husband who has been killed. Did she deserve this?' (pp. 142–3)

It looks at first sight, perhaps, as if Effie is the sole target here. She, after all, is the chief comforter of the book: the character to whom the application to real life of the idea that people have deserts, and should get them, appears least problematic. But is Harvey himself outside the scope of Chatelain's question? Did Effie, despite her moralizing prattle, deserve to be deserted on the *autostrada*?

Well, one might answer, yes. She was a terrorist and a murderer. Ah, but was she *then* a terrorist and a murderer? Well, she was the *same person* then. And that person's *nature* was to be a terrorist and a murderer. It just needed time for all that to come out.

There is something comfortably Cartesian about that way of looking at it. It suggests a reliably substantial notion of the self as something hard and solid, like a billiard ball, with a 'real essence', as seventeenth-century philosophers liked to say. Deconstructionist literary critics are not alone nowadays in feeling uncomfortable with that kind of view. Nor need we fetch our anti-Cartesianism from writers as relatively unfamiliar to the Anglo-Saxon reader as Derrida or Merleau-Ponty. Anti-Cartesian accounts of the self can be found much closer to home: in Hume, for instance, or in Gilbert Ryle's observation in *The Concept of Mind* that we come to know our own nature not by a Cartesian 'privileged access', but as it comes to be known to others, by observing the unfolding of the text of our own acts and sayings across time; or in John Stuart Mill's claim that we have free will because, although we have a nature, we can change it over time by attention to what we do, the habits we allow ourselves to form, and so on. It seems to me important to bring Mill in here, as one of the ways in which Muriel Spark's Catholicism shows itself is in a persistent interest in the freedom of the will. Free will, as one discovers by reading Spinoza, is not a concept accessible to anyone who adopts a consistently Cartesian conception of the self.

What tells intuitively against the Cartesian conception is simply the fact that people change as they reflect and as things happen to them. When Harvey is shown a police photograph of Effie, taken at the time of a shop-lifting episode in Trieste, some months after he left her, he finds difficulty in recognizing his wife.

> 'It looks like a young shop-lifter who's been hauled in by the police,' said Harvey.
>
> 'Do you mean to say it isn't your wife?' said Pomfret. 'She gave her name as Signora Effie Gotham. Isn't it her?'
>
> 'I think it is my wife. I don't think it looks like the picture of a hardened killer.'
>
> 'A lot can happen in a few months,' said Chatelain. 'A lot has happened

to that young woman. Her battle-name isn't Effie Gotham, naturally. It is Marion.' (p. 163)

So Chatelain's question, 'Did she deserve this?' does attaint Harvey: sets him against the Job of the de La Tour painting, who trusts in his railing wife as obstinately as he trusts in the God who afflicts him. Harvey accepts that, and accepting it, his own failure to act as a husband and a lover should have done towards Effie.

'Terrorist is out of the question,' he said. 'I left her because she seemed to want to go her own way. The marriage broke up, that's all. Marriages do.'

'But on a hypothesis, how would you feel if you knew she was a terrorist?'

Harvey thought, I would feel I had failed her in action. Which I have. He said, 'I can't imagine.' (p. 152)

Later, Pomfret returns to the attack:

'But why', said Pomfret, 'did you leave her? . . . You must already have perceived the incipient terrorist in your wife; and on this silly occasion, suddenly, you couldn't take it. Things often happen that way.'

'Let me tell you something,' said Harvey. 'If I'd thought she was a terrorist in the making, I would not have left her. I would have tried to reason her out of it. I know Effie well. She isn't a terrorist. She's a simple shop-lifter. Many rich girls are.' (pp. 164–5)

Notice that Harvey will not accept Pomfret's phrase, 'implicit terrorist', with its Cartesian implications of a fixed essence waiting to realize itself. In his reply he changes the form of words, to 'a terrorist in the making', and suggests that she 'might have been reasoned out of it'. Had he stayed with her: had he possessed some power to trust in the capacity of human beings to respond to reason, as Job, in the face of equally powerful countervailing evidence, trusts both his wife and God.

IV

Harvey's intellectual abstraction, his distance from actual emotional involvement with people, makes him, indeed, short on trust, long on mildly paranoid suspicion. Anne-Marie, the policewoman planted on him as a maid by the police, leaves him a vast bouquet of expensive flowers from her sister-in-law's flower shop, because she feels, maternally, that he may be missing Ruth and baby Clara, who have been sent away to avoid press persecution. Distracted and over-

wrought, Harvey tears the flowers to pieces, looking for a bug ('I think you are not human,' says Anne-Marie, in tears next morning), although, as his more worldly lawyer Stewart points out, it would have been far easier for the police to plant the supposed bug almost anywhere else in Harvey's wholly accessible château. Here again Harvey differs from Job, whose leading characteristic is what the Hebrew text calls *tam*, translated 'integrity', but having additional connotations of innocence and simplicity.

Harvey also remains all too apt to suppose that the natures of others can be exhaustively captured by summary descriptions of role or essence. To Harvey Anne-Marie is primarily a policewoman, secondarily a maid. To the womanizing Stewart she is more than either.

> Stewart walked about the little room, with his scarf wound round his neck. 'It's chilly,' he said. He was looking at the books. 'Does Anne-Marie cook for you?' he said.
>
> 'Yes, indifferently. She's a police agent by profession.'
>
> 'Oh, that doesn't mean much,' said Stewart, 'when you know that she is.' (p. 130)

But all this is changing. It changes because Harvey, under the stress of police interrogation, begins to admit to himself that he has not inwardly deserted Effie, but still loves her. As he comes to admit this, his peculiar and un-Joblike immunity to all save the most drily intellectual kinds of suffering begins to dissolve and desert him.

Now, why? Up to this point, Harvey's suffering has had a curiously metaphysical quality about it. Like the metaphysician, Harvey has tended to engage with the world not as an array of concrete, particular things and phenomena, but as an abstract totality, to be 'made sense of' by being brought into conformity with some abstract intellectual or moral schema.

An example of the metaphysical in this sense is, of course, The Only Problem itself. The problem of pain is not a practical problem, like the problem of how to build a bridge or how to conduct a marriage; it is a stumbling-block in the path of the mind's drive towards *total* comprehension, in this case theological comprehension, of the universe taken as a whole. The intellectual anguish arises because two magisterial claims of a totalizing theology, 'God is absolutely good' and 'God is omnipotent', will not cohere with the irritatingly plain and commonplace fact that suffering exists. The metaphysical impulse, scenting its own death in this impasse, batters its wings against the bars of the inconsistent triad like the fly in Wittgenstein's fly-bottle – and suffers. It hunts about, this being its

nature, for some *general* solution to the problem, some *argument* which might even at this point save the face of natural theology. The history of rational theodicy, from Augustine to Leibniz and beyond, is fascinating enough, and impressive in some of its detailed arguments, but few theologians and no philosophers would want to claim nowadays that its achievement runs much beyond that of giving us a clearer view of the problem.

I think Muriel Spark wants to show us in Harvey a man who in some sense manages to get beyond this problem. But clearly the novel can't be offering us a new and *mirabile dictu* effective set of moves in rational theodicy. The 'getting beyond' has to be of a different kind; one with which the novel is by its nature fitted to deal.[2] Harvey gets beyond the problem not in his thought but in his life, though as we shall see the two are not wholly unconnected.

The clue to what is going on lies, I think, in the passages in which Harvey comes to recognize that he still loves Effie. At first, when asked point-blank by Chatelain whether he does, he tries to recover his balance, to retreat even now into his pose of studious distance: 'He was suddenly indignant and determined to be himself, thoughtfully in charge of his reasoning mind, not any sort of victim' (p. 141). But soon he is admitting his love for Effie to anyone who will listen, including the second, 'sympathetic' interrogator Pomfret:

> Harvey couldn't help liking the young man, within his reservation that the police had, no doubt, sent him precisely to be liked. Soften me up as much as you please, Harvey thought, but it doesn't help you; it only serves to release my own love, my nostalgia, for Effie. And he opened his mouth and spoke in praise of Effie, almost to his own surprise describing how she was merry at parties, explaining that she danced well and was fun to talk to. (p. 151)

The thing that strikes and moves one about this passage is the parallel between it and God's hymn of praise in Job 38–41 to His magnificent and amoral Creation. The voice of God, in the visionary language of the Job poet, delighting in the terrors of Leviathan and Behemoth, is echoed by the voice of Harvey delighting in a woman whom he knows in his heart (if he won't admit this to the police, he lets it slip casually enough to Stewart) to be a terrorist and a murderer.

The movement of the novel at this point reproduces the most intellectually infuriating aspect of the Book of Job: Job's apparently sincere conviction that he has been *answered* by God ('I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. /Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes' [42:5–6]).

We want to say: there has been no *answer*, no *argument* offered; only a vainglorious trumpeting about Leviathan and Behemoth, and a blank assertion of Job's incapacity to receive the understanding he seeks. Similarly Harvey, the questioner of Job, has suddenly begun to sound like the God of Job himself. When later we learn that Harvey has arrived, after Effie's death, at some kind of intellectual accommodation with Job ('since he was near the end of his monograph on Job, he finished it' [p. 185]), we feel a certain frustration. We want to know what form that accommodation *took*, what Harvey *thought*, what *arguments* his experiences suggested to him; to look, in other words, *behind* the surface of the novel.

This desire to excavate, to get behind surfaces even when, as here, there is no *logically* conceivable depth into which we could excavate is, as Wittgenstein observed, one form of the metaphysical impulse. There *is*, after all, nothing behind the surface of the novel (we don't need *hypothesis* here, only thought). It is merely that Harvey's admission to himself of his love for Effie necessarily brings him into a state in which he feels for the first time the force of the two things God is undoubtedly saying to Job in Job 38–41. The first of these is that the very things which make for suffering in the world, wild beasts, for instance, or human beings, are proper objects of delight and love, as well as of terror and moral loathing. To really appreciate this duality, the brute fact of it has to be forcibly made present to one, as it now is to Harvey.

The second thing God has to say to Job is that human knowledge and understanding have their limits: that reality is, beyond a certain point, unfathomable. This is also something Harvey cannot help feeling, acceding as he does to the fundamental paradox of the splendour and dreadfulness of Effie. But a sense of epistemological inadequacy is also something enforced by the logic of Harvey's guilt over his desertion of Effie on the *autostrada*. For if Effie were *just* 'an incipient terrorist', there need be no guilt at having left her. It is only if she is (always and in principle) more than that; if she possesses the numinousness of flawed but infinite possibility; if in herself she is an abyss of possibilities that cannot be fathomed by human knowing, that there is that guilt. And vice versa. The physical similarity, the alternation, of Ruth, Effie and Job's wife in the de la Tour painting which strikes Harvey from time to time corresponds to something deeper: a sense of the three as being one and the same in that they represent alternative possibilities of becoming for one and the same person.

The effect of these revelations on Harvey is to dethrone (or, more modishly, to deconstruct) the masculine, judging, moral intellect, and

correlatively to let in suffering. Harvey begins as a man of rather rigid rectitude, given, in Edward's sceptically perceptive summary, to 'moral judgement. Perhaps a bit too much moral judgement'. From the point of view of this earlier self, strongly redolent of what Kierkegaard called The Ethical, the new Harvey might appear something of a disaster: in love with a dead terrorist and sexually involved with a living and pregnant blackmailer, definitively expelled from the ascetic, quasi-religious seclusion of his cottage and installed in the château surrounded by all the female mess of childbirth and child-centred domesticity. Even his love for Effie is morally suspect. One might be tempted to see in Harvey arguing for Effie's innocence to the police an analogy with Job praying for the comforters. But is he, perhaps, merely trying to defend himself from the realization of guilt which will come with the realization that she really has become a terrorist? In any event his love partakes of all the moral ambiguities of earthly love. When it becomes certain that Effie lies dead in Paris, shot at the scene of another attack on a policeman, Harvey feels a guilty flash of relief at the thought that she is not alive in California and in bed with Nathan Fox.

The new Harvey still has moral impulses, but they work in un-Harveylike ways. Astonishingly, he is no longer closed to something which, if he thought about its implications, he would recognize as the world seen partly through Effie's eyes. Briefly encountering a poor immigrant under some kind of investigation at the police station, Harvey finds himself for the first time interested in a more than intellectual way in the fact that people suffer. More curiously still, we find him speculating that, instead of thought contriving somehow to make sense of suffering, it may be that suffering makes sense of thought, at least in so far as thought can be considered a part of life.

> Patience, pallor and deep anxiety: there goes suffering, Harvey reflected. And I found him interesting. Is it only by recognizing how flat would be the world without the sufferings of others that we know how desperately becalmed our own lives would be without suffering? Do I suffer on Effie's account? Yes, and perhaps I can live by that experience. We all need something to suffer about. But Job, my work on Job, all interrupted and neglected, probed into and interfered with: that is experience, too; real experience, not vicarious, as is often assumed. To study, to think, is to live and suffer painfully. (p. 153)

The tone of this, riddled with qualifications, ifs and perhapses, differs considerably from the confidently morally dissecting manner of Harvey's earlier conversations with Edward, which now might even look in retrospect not so very different from the manner of

Bildad the Shuhite and his friends. The magisterial note of epistemological dominance, of moral overview, has gone. Nevertheless there is a kind of bedrock to Harvey's new attitude: a rooted distaste for the cognitive imperialism of the notion that you can pin down another human being in a phrase. Ernie Howe, Effie's lover and Clara's father, makes no bones about doing this. Stewart *loquitur*, to Harvey:

> 'He says if you want to adopt Clara, you can. He doesn't want the daughter of a terrorist.'
>
> 'How much does he want for the deal?'
>
> 'Nothing. That amazed me.'
>
> 'It doesn't amaze me. He's a swine. Better he wanted money than for the reason he gives.'
>
> 'I quite agree,' says Edward. 'What will you do now that you've finished Job?'
>
> 'Live another hundred and forty years. I'll have three daughters, Clara, Jemima and Eye-Paint.' (pp. 188–9)

V

Part of the interest of *The Only Problem* lies in the way in which it plays with some of the leading ideas of current critical theory. It constitutes itself as a text, for instance, by systematically questioning the meaning of another text. One line of reasoning would have it that the possibilty of doing this destroys the possibility of supposing that any text means, in itself, anything at all: meaning, on this view, simply dissolves into 'inter-textuality'.

And yet it does seem, at least to this reader, that Muriel Spark's novel offers one way of *making sense of* the Book of Job, and that the sense it makes of it does actually *belong* to Job. Is this just an illusion?

Before rashly concluding that it is, it is worth reflecting on the extreme artificiality and complexity of the notion of meaning which passes muster on both sides of the current critical debate, accepted by both New Critics and deconstructionists as defining the differences between them.

The notion of *the meaning of a text*, as understood in these debates, has a double genealogy. On the one hand it is meaning as defined by the theory of signs in Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (the ur-theory against which Derrida primarily defines and distances his own views). According to Husserl a meaning is a complex of intentional acts exhaustively present to consciousness. It is thus

something outside history and outside the text: language *per se*, as a merely conventional technique of *representing* meaning, is inessential to the *constitution* of meaning. On the other hand *meaning* is also taken to mean roughly what it meant to the New Critics and to the line of Romantic theorizing which descends from Coleridge. According to this view there is a single correct interpretation of a text: the one which welds its sense and the operation of its rhetorical devices into the most complete and harmonious unity.

Despite their radically different origins and theoretical purposes, the two views exhibit certain superficial similarities. One can easily see why it should seem so natural and so tempting to take them as constituting a single, coherent theory of meaning, and then to line up for or against that theory. Nevertheless, a single coherent theory of meaning is exactly what they are not; and hence the central issues for critical theory cannot turn in any neat or orderly way upon the question of whether we are to affirm or deny the theory which they supposedly jointly constitute.

Take, for instance, the notion of meaning as something which 'belongs to' a text. On Husserl's view, meaning 'belongs to' a text only extrinsically, in the kind of way in which its meaning belongs to a message in code (i.e., because of some arbitrary associations recorded in the deciphering manual). This won't at all satisfy the Romantic critic, who, because he wants to think of writing as in some sense creating rather than simply mirroring reality, wants meaning to reside inherently in language. But here the Romantic critic finds himself suddenly hand in hand with Derrida, who also thinks of meaning as something whose habitation (*contra* Husserl) is not consciousness but the text, which thus becomes as the Romantics wished an instrument for the active production and dissemination of meanings, rather than for the mere representation of meanings already extant in the self-reflective Cartesian consciousness.

Derrida, of course, just because he holds that meaning is not something external to the text, holds that the meaning of an interpretative text is something which comes into being as that text is written (or 'writes itself': one needs the delicate ambiguity of the French passive voice to catch the right feeling of the meaning emerging wholly in and through the evolution of the text). Doesn't that, now, entail that the meaning ascribed by the interpreting to the interpreted text, being created *de novo* by the former, cannot *really belong to* the latter?

Well, no. It depends how you represent the process of interpretation, and, as I have argued in Chapter 4, it is only if you represent the process as wholly arbitrary that all content drains from any claim by an interpreting text to have elucidated a meaning which really

belongs to the interpreted text. But you can only represent the process of interpreting a text as *wholly* arbitrary at the cost of ceasing to have any kind of conceptual grip on the notion of *text* itself. The meaning of a text *is* what issues from interpretation. It follows that if interpretation is entirely arbitrary (if a text can have any meaning anyone cares to assign to it), then there are no texts, only strings of marks on paper.

What does follow from Derrida's rejection of Husserl's Cartesian theory of meaning is that no interpretation of a text is privileged. There isn't any *single* real meaning, only an abyss of possibilities, just as, on Muriel Spark's view, there isn't any final account of a person, except as an abyss of possibilities. But the one vision in no way invalidates or renders hopeless the encounter between a reader and a text, any more than the other invalidates or makes hopeless the encounter between one person and another. What appears in response to thought and effort will in either case really belong to the Other, even though it might not be quite what someone else might have elicited from that Other.

The analogy between responding to a text and responding to a person returns me to my beginning. I began by asking whether a book as jokey as *The Only Problem* could possibly have anything serious to say about a biblical text, even one as jokey in some respects as Job.

Here again, it depends what you mean by interpretation. It isn't as if Muriel Spark were setting out to offer us *the meaning of* Job in the shape of some complex verbal formula allegedly expressing that. Her method is simply to trace the interaction, in Harvey's life, between Harvey and Job in a way which, through the use of characteristically 'modernist' narrative techniques, unsettles the reader and prods him into activity: invites and nudges him to feel his way through the complex pathways of his own reaction to Harvey's problems, and through them, to Job.

At one point *The Only Problem* touches explicitly on these issues. They arise all over again in connection with translation. We want, naturally, a translation which will enable the text to speak *correctly*, as it *should*; to *every* reader. But uneasiness with this demand is precisely what induces Harvey to stick with the Authorized Version: it lets you make a fresh approach, be your own translator. 'One can get to know the obvious mistakes and annotate accordingly' (p. 133).

> 'What about these other new Bibles?' said Stewart, pointing to a couple of new translations.[. . .]
>
> 'Messy,' said Harvey. 'They all try to reach everybody and end by saying nothing to anybody.' (pp. 132–3)