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Two Great Scottish Novelists: Robin Jenkins and Muriel Spark

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High among the major novelists of postwar Scotland, in the quantity as well as quality of their output and dedication to their art, are Robin Jenkins (1912-2005) and Muriel Spark (1918-2006).

Jenkins’s earlier novels are set in Scotland, and The Changeling (1958) is a connection between the Romantic patriotism declared so boldly by Walter Scott in the Sixth Canto of The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805) to the utter depths of cynicism uttered by Renton, the main character in Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting (1993). In Scott’s poem, the spectacle of the Scottish landscape is the subject of rhapsody: “Breathes there the man with soul so dead / Who never to himself hath said, / This is my own, my native land!”

O Caledonia! stern and wild,
Meet nurse for a poetic child!
Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
Land of the mountain and the flood...

In his poem “Retrieving and Renewing”, written in 2004 for the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Edwin Morgan quotes this:

Breathes there the man
With soul so dead—? Probably! But a scan
Would show his fault was ignorance:
Don’t follow him. Cosmic circumstance
Hides in nearest, most ordinary things.
Find Scotland – find inalienable springs.

This is encouraging. Morgan generates an intrinsic optimism in his curiosity to “Find Scotland” in “ordinary things” and “inalienable springs”. But there’s a more pessimistic, darker response to Scott’s enthusiasm in the film version of Trainspotting’s most famous scene, when Renton refuses to walk into the Scottish landscape. In answer to the question, “Doesn’t it make you feel proud to be Scottish?” he protests with stunning invective that he hates being Scottish because the Scots are “the scum of the earth, the most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash […] we can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonised by” – and all the fresh air, brown heaths, shaggy woods, stern and wild mountains, he says or implies, won’t make any difference.

Between these extremes, in The Changeling, Jenkins has a middle-class schoolteacher in the 1950s take one of his pupils from the working-class slums on a family holiday to a Scottish island. The teacher is all too proud, extolling the virtues of Scotland’s natural beauty, but the boy is overwhelmed by a world he cannot comprehend or engage with. Lacking the strength of cynicism animating Welsh’s characters, and unpersuaded by his teacher’s elation following Scott’s exhortations to praise, the boy is caught in the current of dislocation and Jenkins’s novel ends in tragedy.

In 1957, Jenkins left Scotland, teaching in Afghanistan, Spain and Morocco. His novels set in such locations and later in Borneo, many populated by Scottish characters, can be read in the context of the development of Commonwealth or Postcolonial writing, particularly that of Chinua Achebe and other African novelists whose work was being published in the 1960s. His later work returns to Scotland, revisiting his favoured west coast locations and reviewing the whole history of Scotland in the twentieth century, most effectively in Fergus Lamont (1979). From industrial Glasgow in Just Duffy (1988) to faded aristocracy in Poverty Castle (1991), Jenkins’s vision maintained its scepticism and sympathy. One of his most risky novels, Willie Hogg (1993), begins in Glasgow but finds a kind of redemption in what is discovered in America, in a visit to a mission for Navajo Indians in Arizona. There is “some kind of grace” discovered in humanity but it comes through a constant apprehension of fallibility. People are vulnerable and sympathetic, presented with a full complement of failings and foibles, greeds, self-justifications and vanities.
For Jenkins, the dichotomy of location is between Scotland and elsewhere, and that “elsewhere” is what we might call “postcolonial” nations, including the USA. In Muriel Spark’s fiction, there is a similar “Scotland and elsewhere” dialectic at work, but the “elsewhere” for her is not postcolonial countries but more frequently Europe, Italy or most often the centre of colonial authority and of Empire itself, London. The first poem in her collected poems is “A Tour of London”.

Spark described herself as a poet with her literary roots in Scotland’s Border Ballads, with their sinister humour, supernatural overtones, human relationships, intense states of unexpected and unreliable influence, and strongly-defined characters. The last poem in All the Poems (2004) is a ballad, or a neo-ballad, a “literary” ballad, “The Ballad of Fanfarlo”. At 20 pages, it’s a long, mysterious, unfolding story that combines traditional styles and stances, oblique references and sly, knowing tones with familiar Spark figures, performative, arch, acting inexplicably, both threateningly and attractively. You can’t take your eyes off them even as you know they portend violence. It ends with a dialogue with death. Her most famous Scottish novel, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961) is a classic, both frighteningly serious and inescapably comic, and even in its title, The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960) demonstrates its allegiance. Both novels are about dislocation, Scottish identities in an unstable, international or cosmopolitan world, and both tap into qualities of humour, horror and wry understanding recognisable from the ballads. As in the traditional ballads, her novels are rich in oblique ironies, razor-sharp tones acknowledging the cutting indifference of the world to piety, hope and idealism.

Most crucially and consistently, Spark deploys a quality of dark humour. It is possible to imagine Spark’s novels and stories being written by someone else with equal stylistic precision and narrative compulsion but it is impossible to imagine anyone else doing this and sustaining her quality of humour. It is neither committedly, reassuringly satiric and disdainful (as in Evelyn Waugh) nor consistently sustained by compassion (as in William Boyd). Cruelty is part of its merriment, as in the sound of bagpipes.

It’s worth emphasising those distinctively Scottish aspects of her work, like the character of Dougal Douglas in The Ballad of Peckham Rye: charming, poisonous, bringing out the worst in people who cannot see past his charismatic fluency. He’s a seductive, merciless character familiar from ballads of false or demon lovers and the worlds of Burns, Hogg, Byron and Scott. In The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, the satiric exposure of propriety in
the context of an Edinburgh school is clear enough, but more deeply shocking is the
deliberation with which Spark manoeuvres the reader’s knowledge and expectations through
disjunctions of narrative. Informing readers of later events that will befall her characters,
including their deaths, alters the way in which readers relate to the characters in their linear
histories. The conventions of linear narrative are distorted and turned against you. The sense
of an omniscient narrator no longer offers reassurance (as in Scott or George Eliot) but takes
on a threatening, smiling, villainous distance. Yet the humour connects.

It is when Brodie and others act most self-centredly that authorial distance delivers
tonal balance and ironies to be savoured. In Symposium (1991), Margaret Damien (or
Murchie) appears in London, fashion-conscious, newly married, cosmopolitan, yet the
subterranean implication that she may be a witch and murderess sets the tone. Absolute moral
judgements on acts of good and evil are embroiled in Spark’s fiction in a social world of
unreliable witnesses, foreknown consequences, ignorance that can never claim itself to be
innocent. As with Jenkins, people are sympathetically vulnerable and ridiculously fallible.
Grace is momentary: is there any promise of redemption? In the act of writing itself, there is
the trust to exposition, engagement, exploration: it may be that art supplies a reprieve from
confusion. But the physicality of being, the pleasures of sexuality, the gravity compelled by
age, all insist on fleeting apprehension. Nothing abides. And that prompts speed, not
slowness. One might have expected the realisation of mortal vulnerability to slow the
characters down but with Spark, the narrative usually quickens in this understanding, and
mortality comes closer at an alarming rate.

Spark’s writing is complementary to the great novels of Lewis Grassic Gibbon and
Neil Gunn. It’s a post-Second World War revision or rebuttal of the post-First World War
effort of rebuilding the nation to which Gibbon and Gunn were committed. Spark’s work
anatomises the limitations of people and the inevitability of failure and futility. And she
brings the reader into a position of complicity with this.

The most striking example occurs in the first paragraph of Chapter Two of The Prime
of Miss Jean Brodie. The focus is on Mary Macgregor, one of Jean Brodie’s girls whose
future life is disclosed with insidious speed, so that almost before the reader understands
what’s going on we’re caught up in an unwelcome comprehension of the character’s death.
The opening sentence runs like this: “Mary Macgregor, although she lived into her twenty-
fourth year, never quite realized that Jean Brodie’s confidences were not shared with the rest
of the staff and that her love-story was given out only to her pupils.” The first time you read this, you’re well into the second half of the sentence before you realize you’ve just been informed that Mary will die at twenty-four. That word “although” is a brilliant decoy. A bit later in the same paragraph, we’re told that Mary thought of her first years with Brodie as the happiest time of her life, then this sentence occurs: “She thought of this briefly, and never again referred to Miss Brodie, but had got over her misery, and had relapsed into her habitual slow bewilderment, before she died while on leave in Cumberland in a fire in the hotel.” All those commas, the phrases they separate and connect, structure that sentence for maximum effect. And the next sentence gives you a hideously immediate sense of her death: “Back and forth along the corridors ran Mary Macgregor, through the thickening smoke.” Spark’s forward-projection in the narrative here abandons linear exposition to discomfort the reader, to place us in a state of extreme unease. We have suddenly been given a God-like foreknowledge that we cannot shake off when we go on to read what happens to Mary during her time with Brodie, when the narrative goes back to an earlier period. The foreknowledge is a foreclosure. Just as there’s no escape for Mary in Spark’s novel, there’s no way back from what Spark has delivered to the reader with such icy precision.

There’s a significant contrast to be noted between this and the narrative structure of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s Sunset Song. Each section of that novel begins by combining the end of the preceding section with the end of the new one. So, at the beginning of Part II, Chris is pictured running uphill to the standing stones and lying down to gather her thoughts, remembering the last time she was there, which we’ve just read at the end of Part I. The second section then recounts the narrative of events that has taken her from the end of Part I to the beginning of Part II, which we return to at the end of the section. The effect is the opposite of Spark’s foreclosure. What Gibbon gives us again and again is a sense that the narrative cannot be predicted. What happens in consequence of our actions involves a multitude of choices and possibilities. Nothing is inevitable, and therefore the struggle is worthwhile because a better outcome might be made. Spark offers no such hope or consolation of possibility. In contrast to Gibbon, her vision is brutal and bleak.

Most of her work addresses an international readership but her knowledge of the Scottish literary tradition – however implicit, deeply-processed and unspecified – informs everything, in aspects of humour, grotesquerie, the juxtaposition of polite society and gory violence, the mysterious stranger and the presumptions of class distinction, the supernatural and the materialistic, the ambiguities of writing and oral storytelling, objectivity and
seduction, intention and subversion, the quest to reach beyond the self and the human surrender to the desire for self-fulfilment. These major themes are at the heart of all her work, from early novels like The Comforters (1957) and Memento Mori (1959) through The Mandelbaum Gate (1965) and The Driver’s Seat (1970) to The Takeover (1976) and A Far Cry from Kensington (1988).

She was a convert to Catholicism but no orthodox structures dim her sceptical intelligence and needling suggestiveness. She is unsettling, constantly insisting on the unfinished nature of the world and all the people in it. Neither nationality nor religion offer ultimate security for Spark. Like that of Robin Jenkins, her art is never naïve and sometimes breathtaking. We need them both.