Introduction: Critical Concerns for Muriel Spark

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As with all writers, there are central if never entirely settled critical concerns with the work of Muriel Spark (1918-2006). Readers, students and scholars have repeatedly returned to these areas, two of which are to be found in the present volume in its broad division first into biography especially concerning female experience and second, in one way or another, the materiality of creative writing. Both these terrains offer wide scope where Spark's numerous memorable female characters and the author's own colourful cultural career can be dissected. Often closely interlinked here also in considering Spark's novels, short stories, poetry and drama, which treat for instance the vocation of the female artist, is the minutiae of Spark's own practice as a published writer for more than sixty years. Related to her career again, we might think too of her many fictional protagonists and scenarios concerned with publishing, communication and the media. Connecting to such themes, we see frequently Spark's own striking formal fictional practices, speaking to some extent of the endeavours of the French nouveau roman at the mid-point of the twentieth century and of interest in the lasting climate of post-modernity in the early twenty first century. Spark's formal fictional apparatuses are invariably bound up with her role as a satirist often acerbic, sometimes characterised by commentators as a cool or even chillingly mocking one. These formal mechanics collide and collaborate with the identification of Spark as a religious, specifically Roman Catholic, writer and sit to some degree in tension, perhaps, with her long interest in the Romantic idea of the artist, the notion of the exuberant, lyrically-voiced visionary. Free artistic agency (the ur-quality of Romanticism), the parameters of the religious cosmos and related to both of these things wilfulness and morality in quotidian life are all concerns elegantly, and also problematically, bound up in the package of Spark's fiction.[1] The essays that follow unravel the Sparkian package in a wide variety of ways and speak both to the long-established critical interests in the analysis of Spark's work and as often to more recent emphases from the literary critical sphere.

Spark's own reading practices as a critic, editor and life-writer would repay close, extended study. Her *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1951), *John Masefield* (1953) and *Emily Bronte: Her life and work* (1953), the latter written with Derek Stanford are all highly readable and full of apercus that make Spark a highly accessible and illuminating commentator more than sixty years after publication, although it is the first and third of these publications that articulate with her own output most readily. Not a feminist in any programmatic sense, Spark's work on Shelley and Bronte are part of an accelerating criticism of 'women's writing' in the twentieth century. As Martin Stannard points out, Spark is in the vanguard of restoring Mary Shelley to serious critical attention; moreover the 'Gothic surrealism' of which Spark sees Shelley as a progenitor might be read as continuously active as a developing modus operandi in Spark's own novels, for instance in *The Comforters* (1957), *Not to Disturb* (1971) and also in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

(1961).[2] *Jean Brodie* is less explicitly gothic or supernatural or surreal than these other two novels, but even in its case we find implicit Gothic referentially: for instance, when Jean Brodie describes her dead lover Hugh Carruthers, ostensibly among the fallen in the Great War, as both singer (like one of her present-day lovers, Gordon Lowther) and painter (like another, Teddy Lloyd). In other words, like Frankenstein's monster, Hugh is constructed by Brodie from the body parts of others. This wry reversal from *Frankenstein*, the dead made from the living as opposed to the other way around also exemplifies the kind of compressed wit (referential and at the same time formally deep and expansive) by which Spark is often identified as a poet in a novelist's skin. In the present collection Willy Maley and Dini Power take a rare critical look at Spark's love poetry and highlight a certain skill. However, as they observe, across 'her writing Spark tends to depict love and lovers with deep cynicism'. It may be the case that the much more oblique, generally more 'private' form of prose fiction rather than poetry suited Spark temperamentally, especially at a time in the mid-twentieth century where the raw sensuality of the work of Dylan Thomas or the signature quality of the Confessional poets did not suit her own rather reserved personality. Maley and Power in their treatment are suggestive about the private Spark personality as they detect a certain occlusion in Spark's poems even while these relate to outward anniversary celebrations which can credibly be seen to have autobiographical relevance.[3]

As her response to biographical writing about her seems to demonstrate, Spark was far from comfortable with such examination. Her 'official' biography appeared in 2009, three years after her death. Martin Stannard had been her choice of biographer and produced a book excellent for both its thorough research and in its style, qualities that Spark herself exemplified across most of her writing. Rather curiously in the end, Spark fell out with Stannard for reasons that are far from entirely clear. History here somewhat repeated itself as previously Spark had excoriated her erstwhile close friend and collaborator, Derek Stanford (1918-2008) both in her own alternatingly arch, unbuttoned and obtuse autobiography (this latter quality signalled in its underwhelming title), *Curriculum Vitae* (1992) and in her novel *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) where Stanford's proxy in the character Hector Bartlett is lashed as a 'pisseur de copie'.[4] Stanford demonstrated perhaps an entitled opportunism in publishing biographical memoir of Spark in his *Inside the Forties* (1977) and in his *Muriel Spark* (1963), the latter the first extensive critical study of the author by now an international name following the success - most especially - of *Jean Brodie*. The culture of literary London in the 1940s and 1950s in which Spark and Stanford were well-connected, 'minor' figures is generally ripe for a critical reappraisal that it is currently wanting. Spark's part in the post-war London literary scene, as documented in her autobiography, Stanford's memoirs and refracted in *A Far Cry from Kensington* as well as in another deliciously barbed 'historical novel' by Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (1981), would make an excellent starting point in such a project. A particularly nice vignette in such a study would be Spark's work as Secretary of the Poetry Society and editor of the organisation's journal, *The Poetry Review* from 1947-49. Here she came into conflict with, indeed in Spark's own term she was 'harassed' by, Dr Marie Stopes (1880-1958), a Vice-President of the society and famous as a pioneer of birth control.[5] Indeed, the evidence of her impertinent enquiries to Spark about her past private life, somewhat contradict Stopes'

reputation as being in the vanguard of feminism. Perhaps the funniest moment in all of *Curriculum Vitae* is when Spark lets rip on Stopes with a stylish, full-frontal, Jean Brodie-esque vindictiveness:

> Up to his death three years earlier she had been living with Lord Alfred Douglas, the fatal lover of Oscar Wilde, an arrangement which I imagine would satisfy any woman's craving for birth control. I met her at one of our meetings and knew she disliked me intensely on sight. I was young and pretty and she had totally succumbed to the law of gravity without attempting to do a thing about it.[6]

In the present volume, Ernest Schonfield in 'The Publishing Scene in *A Far Cry from Kensington*' highlights the typical Sparkian focus of entertainingly vicious human behaviour as he offers a reading of the 'literary field' which Spark assembles in that novel from her 40s and 50s experience. He foregrounds in this text issues of professional power, class and gender, of 'art' (theoretically more idealistic) and 'craft' (negotiating cultural, institutional attitudes as well as those of individual egos. This is the daunting, but quotidian terrain that the central protagonist Nancy Hawkins must traverse to have a career in the literary world. There is identifiable here, then, as elsewhere in Spark's oeuvre, a sharp anthropological terrain even if, arguably, the text resists drawing complete sociological conclusions, which perhaps anyway isn't the job of fiction (or of any creative genre). *A Far Cry from Kensington* is simultaneously lyrical and an essay in petty, ridiculous human behaviour, and counts in Schonfield's reading, as Spark's oblique reflections on the making of a 'good book' or novel which emerges precisely from such seemingly oxymoronic factors. If resistant towards her biographers and evasive, playfully or otherwise, in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark often has her novels point towards these qualities which might be taken to reveal her own hallmark interests as a writer. We might think again of Sparkian autobiographical elements entangled within her fictions, not least as Amy Woodbury Tease in the present volume in 'Muriel Spark's Windows and the Architecture of Surveillance' reminds us of Spark's career with British Intelligence during World War II. The strategic spreading of misinformation in which she was therein involved has obvious purchase across Spark's fictional oeuvre, including the misapprehension that truth or perspectives have a ready clarity in the first place. As Woodbury Tease points out, Frank Kermode's interview with Spark in 'The House of Fiction', alluded to below, reflects upon the variety of authorial/narratorial/fictional perspectives among the most celebrated living British novelists in 1963 concluding, 'there may be above all a God-shaped window giving perfect all-round visibility, but theirs is in no case held to resemble it.' The propaganda of totalitarian movements, World War II and the Cold War by the early 1960s perhaps especially informed this novelistic scepticism about straight-viewed truths. Much more remains to be done on Spark's depiction of twentieth-century paranoia. Our human perspectives, as Spark repeatedly signals, are deceptively (often self-deceivingly) constructed. In *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), a novel set in a blitzed London during World War II, as Woodbury Tease commenting on a Sparkian emblem therein says,

'Windows secure the fantasy of stability and coherence for the girls of slender means as they are continuously replaced with new glass.' Vehicles of vision are fragile and easily undermined, as Spark the black propagandist is acutely aware.

One might suspect that Spark believes biographical (and even autobiographical) portrait, ultimately too, to be hopelessly deceptive, personal and subjective (all the more so perhaps as it often affects objectivity), to be part of a routine failure in the human sensibility and at its worst a nefariousness of sorts, seen also within the ordinary, everyday sphere of the world where we as a species interest ourselves in and concoct stories about our fellow human beings. It can be argued that much of Spark's fiction in its moral patterning would suggest as much. The book that is centred at the heart of Spark's canon, its author's most lustrous story, is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The novel has a genuine fame and enduring popularity internationally and yet it features a jarring (if also intriguing) duplicity. For a start, the text is to a large extent an exuberant portrait of a single-woman, an artist manqué, operating in difficult historical, sociological times but the treatment of the eponymous Jean Brodie is precisely un-indulgent in the cruel flash-forwards that reveal - sooner than the reader ought to want - her coming to grief professionally and also her as yet distant death from cancer. This 'experimental' plotting-technique jars somewhat with - even contradicts - the wilfulness of a character that many readers wish to like or at least enjoy through the gradual unfolding of her adventures. Those adventures however are cruelly telescoped in the reader's awareness of the failed parameters of Brodie's designs and life in general. For the reflective reader this might allow a measure of pathos, of basic sympathy for Brodie as a human being but the overall decentring of the central character in the novel through prolepsis makes for an unsettling reading experience within the terms of traditional realist fiction. Whether in spite of or because it is a text that combines lovingly realistic canvas (to some considerable degree) of 1930s Edinburgh with an alienating fictiveness, *Jean Brodie* was the book that made Muriel Spark an internationally known name. It was propelled in the first instance by its appearance in the *New Yorker* (14th October 1961). This impeccably bourgeois magazine can be read as carefully cultivating Spark's writing, sometimes rejecting her early submitted work but continuously encouraging to her so that in her life-time Spark appeared in seventeen issues over forty-three years from 1960 until 2003. *Jean Brodie* clearly made its author a darling of the publication, to be afforded much future space. Consequently, the other two big pieces of Sparkian contribution to the *New Yorker* were the serialisation of some parts of *The Mandelbaum Gate* from May to August 1965 and the publication, like *Jean Brodie* complete in one issue, of *The Driver's Seat* in May 1970. All three of these novels feature, each in its own way, highly cosmopolitan (or at least would-be cosmopolitan) female central protagonists. For a period during the 1960s Spark had the use of an office in the magazine's premises and there remains to be written a full critical account of this relationship beyond the 'mere' biographical facts in terms of the dynamic of the cultural politics and ethos of the *New Yorker* in Spark's writerly career.[7]

Spark's cultural cosmopolitanism deriving therein much writing capital is remarkable across her career in her inhabiting of living space in Scotland, Africa and three particularly great centres of cultural stylisation: London, New York and, in later years, Italy. In the early years of her association with the *New* Yorker, Spark developed a close working relationship with

her editor at the magazine, Rachel Mackenzie, a great believer in Spark's talent but whose alteration of the text for the first appearance of *Jean Brodie* in print made for a much less effective version than that of the first book edition.[8] In the present collection Helen Stoddart in her essay, 'Muriel Spark and the "Hired Grammarians"', highlights the minutiae of this situation in discussing the excisions and unhelpfully regularised punctuation and syntax of the *New Yorker* version. There is now a rich canon of literary criticism of Spark's work, and going forward what is wanted on the scholarly front arguably is more serious work on Spark's manuscripts, publishing history and print editions including, perhaps, a full-fig textual edition of all of her fiction. Colin McIlroy in this collection in his '"I knew what was what": Correspondence in the Muriel Spark' reflects on his experience (and the knowledge therein derived) as Spark Curator at the National Library of Scotland.[9] This Spark archive comprises 'around 360 boxes totalling over 170 feet or 52 metres of shelf-space [and] is the largest modern literary archive of any single author held at the National Library of Scotland'. Here resides material that would be invaluable towards a scholarly edition, comprising literary correspondence and much biographical material in general, including items from Spark's personal book collection such as her copy of John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua.* Much work remains potentially to be done on the exact influence of Newman on Spark and her adoption of Roman Catholicism.[10] Intriguingly, McIlroy takes us to his conclusion that Spark's intensive attention to archiving leads to a situation where, 'If meta-fiction is the practice of writing fiction that foregrounds its very fictionality – or in other words, writing fiction about writing fiction - then Muriel Spark is a meta-archival writer.' This archive, then, might be read as itself another self-reflexive statement by Spark about her synthesising, creative, sensibility. McIlroy's suggestive approach here is currently being explored further in an AHRC funded PhD project supervised between the NLS and the University of Glasgow.[11] More generally, the archival material of *The New Yorker* and at the University of Tulsa ('Muriel Spark Papers 1957-88') as well as in the NLS, now comprises a formidable set of materials that ought to allow Spark scholarship to go forward in many directions as we move beyond the centenary of the author's birth.[12]

Spark's worldwide reputation in Scotland has of course registered, but her 'Scottishness', whatever that precisely might mean has been called into question. In a remarkable outburst her fellow novelist Robin Jenkins (1912-2005) has contended that it would be 'very difficult to get any real Scottish person accepting [Muriel Spark] as a Scottish writer'.[13] One wonders about logic and motivation here from the mouth of a fellow-novelist who often writes about Scotland but also ranges further afield in his settings to include Catalonia and Afghanistan. Jenkins, by and large, follows in the wake of the nationalist literary revival of Scotland at whose centre stood Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978). Even if Spark had remained in Scotland as part of the boozy, masculinist literary scene MacDiarmid and others encouraged in the mid-twentieth century, her sensibilities were undoubtedly at odds with the main mover of the Scots language revival from the 1920s on. For a start, Spark expressed the view that she saw 'no point in offering Scots dialects (which in any case are not regionally consistent) to the intelligent reader […] in Essex, or Worcestershire [..] in the United States of Australia' and which these readers 'cannot understand.'[14] In 2003 Spark described MacDiarmid as 'treasonous' after the publication of some rediscovered poems where the latter described

the English as Scotland's 'only enemies' and that he could 'hardly care' about the Nazi bombing of London.[15] We might here remember that Muriel Spark worked for British Intelligence during World War II which further highlights her stark difference in mentality from MacDiarmid. Of Jewish heritage, a woman converting to Catholicism and living for much of her life in 'foreign' places as well as writing more often about other places than Scotland, we can easily see that Spark's Scottish identity might not be seen very readily as 'mainstream' (from a nationalist point of view). Spark may well be British, may well be described as a European writer in her cosmopolitan range, but her work is also often freighted with Scottish material: her debut novel *The Comforters* (1957) features in Georgina Hogg an important protagonist who references James Hogg whose *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is such an important book for Spark in helping her to imagine religious and moral hypocrisy in her fiction, and is also a clear influence in scenario in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) also features an important culture-clash where a Scottish protagonist, Dougal Douglas, modelled to a large extent on traditions of Scottish folklore and balladry is inflicted on modern-day, secular, materialist London. Towards the end of her career, Spark's *Symposium* (1990) is likewise freighted with ideas of the Scottish supernatural.[16] In the present volume, Cairns Craig re-examines the inspiration of J.M. Barrie's influence in Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) as well as elsewhere in her fiction. He finds Barrie an explicit presence in Spark's work even more widely and in a way little expected by previous Spark criticism. The influence of Barrie's *Peter Pan* especially, Craig contends, provides for Spark a realm of the fantastic supernatural that countermands a too realistic tradition in the novel which became (from her point of view) through the twentieth century all too minutely psychological:

> Barrie's parodic play with the relations between the text and world it is supposed to represent opened up, for Spark, not only the aesthetics of the 'miraculous' but a way of challenging the whole realist tradition of the novel, including the psychological realism of the 'stream of consciousness' techniques which had been so important to her modernist precursors.

Barrie's influence, then, and by extension that of Scottish literature arguably runs deep in Spark. Although it might be said that Barrie is yet another Scottish writer which the modern 'canon' of Scottish Literature has found it difficult to absorb.

Her most obviously Scottish book, *Jean Brodie*, saw Spark installed as an internationally famous writer as well as within the first rank of British fiction-writers. It led to her participation with six other novelists in a famous set of interviews with Frank Kermode under the title of 'House of Fiction' in the *Partisan Review* (Spring, 1963).[17] These other writers were Ivy Compton-Burnett, Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch, C.P. Snow, John Wain and Angus Wilson, a disparate, lustrous group of prize-winning writers, all of whom were part of the literary intellectual cream of early 1960s writing. We see the *Jean Brodie* effect again in

its author's appearance in the first short monographs about her by Karl Malkoff for the 'Columbia Essays on Modern Writers' series in 1968 (where Spark was the only Scot in a most distinguished list of English, Irish and European writers) and by Patricia Stubbs for the 'Writers and Their Work' series by Longman for the British Council in 1973, Spark, along with Compton Mackenzie the only twentieth-century Scottish writer to that point in the series.[18] Both of these critical works, clearly, see *Jean Brodie* sitting at the centre of Spark's achievement. The novel reverberated also in its spinning out into other genres: the stage-version of 1966, which was adapted by the American playwright and screen-writer Jay Presson Allen (1922-2006) who drove it as a project for theatre. It premiered at Wyndham's Theatre in London and starred Vanessa Redgrave (b.1937), was a massive hit and transferred to New York in 1968 for another successful run (of a year) starring Zoe Caldwell (1933-2020). The play-version was revived periodically down to 2006 (invariably with a strong leading woman) due to a sure market based on the enduring appeal of both the novel and film frequently rerun on television across the English-speaking world. Allen wrote the screen-play also for the 1969 film version of *Jean Brodie*, starring Maggie Smith (b.1934) and this inspired in turn a highly successful Scottish Television series of the book in 1978 starring Geraldine McEwan (1932-2015). The television version was heavily reliant on Allen's adaptive writing but drew on several other writers also, who added scenes and dialogue quite distant from Spark's original novelistic conception most especially with supplementary detail on the large politics of the inter-war period.[19] Overall, a veritable constellation of theatrical and filmic talent, along with Spark's original scenario, has made *Jean Brodie* the monster-success of the Spark canon.[20]

The smash-hit movie version of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* makes no attempt to simulate the proleptic trickery or the wayward narrative voice of Spark's novel. It presents more or less a straightforward realist filmic treatment of the novel, replete with poignant historical period-charm and the successful television version likewise grounds the text as a piece of 'historical fiction'. The film-version acknowledges the Catholicism of Brodie's lover, Teddy Lloyd but dispenses with the novel's purported deeper influence of Lloyd's religion upon Brodie's star pupil, Sandy Stranger who goes on to become a nun celebrated for her psychological treatise, 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace'. We learn nothing of the latter scenario in the film. Although undergraduate students and others in the early twenty-first century are plausibly much more interested in the novel as an almost allegorical critique of Fascism, *Jean Brodie* can be read as a deeply Catholic, anagogic novel implicitly about the agency of God and freewill, with a certain satirical side-swipe at Calvinism and its doctrine of predestination. Sandy sees Brodie as mimicking the God of Calvin, observing her teacher to assume herself above the normal moral code and attempting to write the future narratives of her chosen girls' lives. The religious perspective, largely oblique in the novel, essentially disappears in the format of the film-version. *Jean Brodie* was the zenith of Spark's early-period novels, which had been very much appreciated for their Catholic spiritual outlook by the likes of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Waugh had been a huge fan of Spark's first novel, *The Comforters*, and of *Memento Mori* (1959), with their religiously sign-posted titles and of *The Bachelors* (1960), with its strong, although often satirical, theme of priestly intercession.[21] Greene, early a fan of Spark's short stories from the mid-

50s, became a staunch supporter materially as well as morally.[22] One way of placing Spark is to suggest she is one of the three great British Catholic fiction-writers of the twentieth-century (post-Chesterton) along with Waugh and Greene. The tension between the 'immaterial' context (at its most general, God) to Spark's fiction and the materialism of her formal interest is one that is perhaps not easily resolved, perhaps not meant to be. Peter Kemp (1913-93), ironically enough in the context of *Jean* Brodie a man who had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco, produced a superbly nuanced critical study, *Muriel Spark* (1974) for the British Council series, 'Novelists and Their World'. For Kemp, the disjunction between Spark's form and her treatment of humanity produces a thrilling, chilling reading experience so that, 'the form of her books is deeply satisfying [and] there is as counterpoint to this, the disturbing tenor of her content.'[23] Kemp's summation opens up the nice subtlety that it is Spark's human characterisation that is ultimately discomfiting while her deliberately jarring formal manipulation might, perhaps, represent a kind of balm in the presentation of frequently awful human behaviour. Certainly, this is the kind of paradox that might be said to appeal within the Sparkian mentality, where we might as readers conceivably find literary trickery more upsetting than the depiction of immoral action.

For the present writer, the best book on Spark's work remains Ruth Whittaker's *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1982) which sums up Spark's modus operandi with typical aplomb, saying of its subject that she:

> adopted twentieth-century technology, as it were, to deal with eternal truths; and, having suited her techniques to a sceptical and materialistic age, seeks to persuade us that angels and demons are neither metaphoric nor outdated conceits, but exist here and now in convents, classrooms and on the factory floor. In doing this she has remained peculiarly independent of pressures from both realism and the experimentalism of post-modernist fiction.[24]

Spark's 'independence' from realism at points extends to not 'caring' for her characters, such as the notorious example Whittaker cites of the characters killed, struck by lightning, and rendered with analogously stark reduction in a subordinate clause in *Not to Disturb* (1970).[25] Likewise the proleptic flash-forward technique in *Jean Brodie* and other novels performs similar, syntactical dismissal of characters whose lives are not allowed to unfold for the reader in 'realistic', chronological fashion. Equally, Spark's usage of post-modernist 'technology' circumscribed by an implied supernatural cosmos means that Spark is not easily corralled within the materialist circumscriptions upon which late twentieth-century literary theory was centred. In this secular age, Spark's religious mentality has probably not enjoyed the sustained attention it deserves, although a fruitful recent channel is forged in this respect in Cairns Craig's, *Muriel Spark, Existentialism and the Art of Death* (2020), which pays serious attention once again to the terrain most firmly established by Whittaker in analysing the choices made by Spark's characters in the context of the human understanding of free-will and morality.[26] In considering Spark in a context of 'Christian

Existentialism', Craig makes an important contribution to a recent re-burgeoning of Spark criticism that adopts a strong theological focus.[27]

A path-breaking attempt to foreground Spark in secular, materialist terms is to be found in the collection, *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (2002), and, indeed, this blazes a trail for a number of the sociological concerns in the present volume.[28] Spark's precise detailing of the material world, for all that her fiction might warn against the danger of such attention is highlighted by Fiona Jardine as she argues in 'Art & Industry Must Walk Hand in Hand: Muriel Spark and Twentieth Century Design Ideology', explaining that 'there is much to be gained from comparing Spark's vocabulary and literary style to texts found in magazines, adverts and similar non-literary sources of the period.' The architectural, the popular culture of advertising, the existence of class all provide a less than coherent human world, a palimpsest of situation through the periods of time and also in the present. And amid this jumbled, odd world as a result Jardine nicely suggests that for Spark 'all writing is prosthetic', by implication a justified parody of this oddly layered reality inhabited by modernity with its mass systems and communications. Carole Jones makes the nice point in this collection in 'Muriel Spark's Waywardness' that we should be careful not to inhabit a masculinist outlook that judges Muriel Spark as 'hard' as though this should be an un-feminine quality. In various ways, as Jones points out, Spark is alive to lazy binaries and, indeed, makes creative capital from the constructed and accidental contrapuntal. Jones identifies in Spark's fiction, so replete with many 'wayward' female protagonists, a more general 'waywardness, a knowing engagement with the disjunction between how things are and how they could otherwise be […] and Spark's writing inhabits that space.' That female choice of liminality both in Spark's own wayward fiction and the waywardness of so many of her women-characters allows a refreshing feminist reading of the 'oddness in Spark's fiction. Jones sums up the radical activity in Spark's writing where it often embodies a 'poetics of waywardness' where her 'texts […] act out rather than psychologise the pathologies of femininity'. Jones also suggests that in the period in the writer's career that so many critics find the most intriguing, from *The Public Image* to *The Hothouse by the East River* or between 1968 and 1973 her 'texts suggest that as the counter-cultural "sexual revolution" of that period proceeded so did Spark's scepticism increase regarding the tenets of freedom made possible in extant feminine identities'. Similarly, in 'Spark's Spinsters: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in the Novels of Muriel Spark' Susannah Thompson discusses the boarding houses and similar locations that feature in Spark, and by extension 'spinsterhood' as a liminal space seen usually by society as a marker of incompleteness. For Spark though these becomes part of the author's creative corridor, not only at the thematic level but in terms of a poetics of something even less positively freighted than 'waywardness', perhaps, of 'oddity'. This 'odd capacity for vision' on Spark's part might again lead us to identify a version of 'Romantic' vision.[29] In Thompson's reading though, we are especially returned to the centre of Spark's female power: 'For Muriel Spark, writing furiously in her lodging rooms in the late 1950s, the position of the unmarried woman was the beginning of some of her most celebrated and memorable works, works which brought spinsters off the shelf.' Thematically, Spark's one foray into drama, *Doctors of Philosophy* (1962) certainly speaks generally to the context of second wave feminism featuring centrally, as it does, female

academics reflecting on the courses of their careers and the barriers to these. In the present volume Ian Brown, in 'Metatheatricality and dramatic contexts in Muriel Spark's writing for performance', re-reads Spark's play pin-pointing, 'a zany quality, which, with its prominent female characters (all men reduced to being called 'Charlie') combines elements of comedy of manners, West End boulevard theatre and Monty Python.' Spark's signature qualities of generic self-reflexiveness and witty dialogue both bitingly and laconically funny are all found to be in evidence in *Doctors of Philosophy* along with that familiar Sparkian terrain of the collided 'surreal' and the 'mundane.' Brown reminds us also of the powerful radio plays written by Spark, suggesting, perhaps, that it is time Spark's dramatic-writing, much more effective than her poetry, ought to have more critical attention paid to it. Along the way too, further consideration of Spark's personal relationship with radio and theatre in London in the late 50s and early 60s, glimpsed in Brown's treatment, would allow a much fuller picture of Spark as part of the contemporary London literary scene.[30]

Another materialism of sorts which is certainly present but not necessarily easy to weigh in Spark's work is the matter of history. As Catriona Macdonald argues in the present collection's '"Making Patterns with facts": unmaking history in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', the novel is full of 'dehistoricisation'. The beginning of chapter 3 of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* illustrates this point well, as we observe disorientating (though at the same time comedic) shifts in the narrative voice. The chapter begins 'The days passed and the wind blew from the Forth'.[31] Ostensibly we move from this dreamy, romantic narrator to a more historically precise voice that tells us about the state of middle-class women in interwar Edinburgh. We seem to be entering quite a precise historical sociology as we are told of these women:

> They went to lectures, tried living on honey and nuts, took lessons in German and then went walking in Germany; they bought caravans and went off with them into the hills among the lochs; they played the guitar, they supported all the new little theatre companies; they took lodgings in the slums and, distributing pots of paint, taught their neighbours the arts of simple interior decoration; they preached the inventions of Marie Stopes; they attended the meetings of the Oxford Group and put Spiritualism to their hawk-eyed test. Some assisted in the Scottish Nationalist Movement; others like Miss Brodie, called themselves Europeans and Edinburgh a European capital, the city of Hume and Boswell.[32]

The deliberate, flaky indeterminacy of the novel's narrative voice pertains thematically, even here in the chaotic frenzy of activity amidst ostensibly 'real history.' Judgement of any kind from anyone is suspect amid the welter of the world's activities and this epistemological reality extends even to include Sandy's aforementioned adolescent

identification of Brodie with the God of Calvin might not be solid in its melodramatic apprehension as it might at first appear. Catriona Macdonald identifies this deep rendition of subjectivity or capricious changeability of material inhering within the central character's all-enveloping wilfulness. As she says, 'throughout the novel things temporal and matters contextual appear at times interchangeable with character and Brodie's "prime" – as the explanation for everything – negates the need for causality'. David Hume and James Boswell might have in common a certain converging identity in the Scottish Enlightenment but still overarching mutability is inscribed. Boswell the diarist, the recorder of quotidian factuality, is also divergent with Hume the arch-sceptic whose scepticism extends to doubting the common-sense observation of temporal cause and effect. Even here, then, in the 'resolution' of the paragraph quoted above with 'the city of Hume and Boswell' there is fissure rather than closure, an openness that extends throughout the novel which signals the ultimate limitations of perspective for author, characters and readers.

Real social history is no doubt registered to some extent in *Jean Brodie's* sketch of certain British women of the time, but as well as this factual capturing of their disparate, common political, cultural and social interests, with typical Sparkian zeugma, something else is going on which renders the text even more fork-tongued. There is, we are told, a 'legion' of these women, a theological subtext from the synoptic Gospels and their telling of the story of the Gadarene swine. Here Jesus interrogates the demon as to its identity and the demon answers 'My name is legion for we are many.' The polyphonous theme of deceitful fact and character in the novel, the potentially serpentine nature of the world is registered here yet again in terms that are explicitly Christian. Sociology remains a compelling interest in contemporary Spark criticism, but the author's formal signalling of indeterminate reality throughout her oeuvre seemingly countermands the ideological, materialistic reading-project. As Judy Sproxton finds when she mounts the most explicit sociological enquiry in *The Women of Muriel Spark* (1992), Spark ultimately presents 'a fragmentary and bafflingly mysterious life [that] will awake in the reader an admission that we see through a glass darkly.'[33] Spark's 'through the glass darkly' focus is exemplified in many moments within her fiction including in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) which features a scene depicting the mass joy in London in 1945 on Victory in Europe day. Amid this crowded celebration about to enjoy the appearance of a triumphant Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, a murderer plunges a knife into a young woman; public positivity, and seemingly huge, historic community event is undercut by individual nefariousness. Spark has specialised in her fiction in essaying both group and individual behaviour and neither type offers much in the way of optimism that the world is overwhelmingly moral. Indeed, the fragile consensus of social activity is often and all too easily undermined by personal wrong-doing. This contention might lead us back to what these days is a rather old-fashioned writerly categorisation of Spark the moralist.

Allegory is conventionally a vehicle with a moral tenor, and *Jean Brodie*, as has been noted, might be read as looking somewhat like an allegory on political totalitarianism although the religious element even for those who wish to prioritise the book as a study in fanaticism obtrudes not entirely helpfully. Religion and politics seemingly collide yet again in a text featuring an even more extreme character-version of Brodie in Alexandra, the convent

superior in *The Abbes of Crewe* (1974) whose love of the poetic is used with an authoritarian hand to condition reality within her religious demesne. As often noted but seldom particularly explored, this novel seems to be Spark's most closely-worked allegory, satirising the murky and comical corruption of Richard Nixon and his cronies amid the 'Watergate' scandal of the early 1970s. In the present volume, Colin Kidd helpfully assembles the allegorical particulars pointing out their comic effect and suggesting that in this novel, 'arguably, Spark's real subject is style'. One can see why Nixon, as licentious with the truth as Jean Brodie as he similarly created a self-contained version of the world in which he personally in the end enjoyed a very debatable grasp on veracity, would attract Spark's attention. Kidd considers that *The Abbess of Crewe* might be 'in some remote sense a Catholic parable', but refuses to reach this definitive conclusion. This is in keeping with the endlessly, mirrored, echoing effect that critics often find in Spark's fiction. Kidd detects in both forms and themes of *The Abbess of Crewe* a self-reflexive echo chamber or hall of mirrors:

> Allegory is also overlaid, arguably, with deliberate self-satirizing, a portrait of the artist's own whimsical authorial despotism. Alternatively, of course, this revelation of the capricious side of Spark's character is unconscious and inadvertent: an accidental glimpse, perhaps, of the Devil's cloven hoof.

Spark's most experimentally, self-reflexive period is represented perhaps by the sequence of novels that ends with *The Abbess of Crewe*, where the characters live lives enclosed, not so much by the convent, as by farcical allegory and by their own slavery to system (even one that is outwardly, but not inwardly) spiritual. Three novels of similarly claustrophobic formality precede that text. In *The Driver's Seat* (1970) the female central protagonist is a kind of Jean Brodie stripped back to robotic form, famously taking a formal joke from the novel itself, a 'whydunnit' rather than a 'whodunnit' in its proleptic treatment of a murder, or is it a suicide? This character Lise might be read as her author's ultimate moral and formal cipher, or as a sociological statement of the extreme effect of patriarchy. Spark herself believed this book to be her crowning achievement and one of the best analyses of the way in which the reader must re-read to appreciate its chilling parameters is by one the world's best crime writers, Ian Rankin (b.1960).[34] *Not To Disturb* (1971) features a gothic plot full of inevitability or a set of clichés retrod, as it were, surreally re-energised to signal moral decadence. *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) has central characters which are ghosts as continuing to inhabit Manhattan, their choking egos refusing to realise their own deaths (and one character impossibly conceived by ghosts) as the novel riffs on J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. If this claustrophobic terrain is a Spark stock-in-trade, there is also much ventilation across her oeuvre as pointed out by Mark Currie in 'Already and Not Yet Written: Unfinished Acts of Writing in the Novels of Muriel Spark'. He looks at the ways in which authorial authority is repeatedly destabilised and at the 'unfinished narratives' that feature

throughout Spark's fiction. Currie returns us to that Sparkian collision of the freely real and the artificial. For him, Spark emerges as a writer deeply curious, reflective about what she herself produces as he tells us, 'Spark's dramatisations of [the] relation between contingency and writing, or between freedom and the graphic surface of a novel, belong to this species of curiosity about the book as an object.' Spark's curiosity about the book as a form, the fiction as a genre, pertains, it might be suggested throughout her career. Her output of witty, ironic, experimental, moral religious and social fiction remains more than usually critically indeterminate in any definitive sense. This is the 'crooked dividend' of Muriel Spark's fiction.[35]

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[1] For an illuminating account of Spark's post-Romantic sensibility see, Colin William McIlroy, *Muriel Spark and the Romantic ideal.* Unpublished PhD thesis (2015), University of Glasgow. http://theses.gla.ac.uk/6439/.
[2] Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), pp.115-118; p.117.
[3] My overall speculation, however, about autobiographical relevance is just that: speculation. Spark is simply a better writer of fiction than of poetry. Her rather discontinuous published output of some seventy poems are often witty, tell entertaining narrative stories about others and quite often reflect on the process of creativity. They probably show the influence of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden above all others. In a late work that clearly delighted Spark, *All the Poems of Muriel Spark* (New York: New Directions, 2004) her poems are collected. In the Foreword we have something like a cri de Coeur, perhaps, where not for the first time Spark self-identifies:

> Although most of my life has been devoted to fiction, I have always thought of myself as a poet. I do not write 'poetic' prose, but feel that my outlook on life and my perceptions of events are those of a poet. Whether in prose or verse, all creative writing is mysteriously connected with music and I always hope this factor is apparent throughout my work. (p.xii).

If her prose is not 'poetic' it contains a myriad of rhetorical tricks at the linguistic as well as at the formal level, including just about every species of metaphor it is possible to find. A 'literary linguistic' study of Spark's fiction would make for an excellent project. What she means above by the connection with music is anyone's guess, but one can see Spark enjoying critics trying to engage with her typically gnomic statement.

A most useful gathering of statements by Spark about her life and art is to be found along with a compendium of well-chosen secondary criticism in Joseph K. Hynes (ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark* (New York : G.K. Hall; Toronto : Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992). One of the most revealing interviews with Spark is to be found in Robert Hosmer, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark' in *Salmagundi* No. 146/147 (Spring-Summer 2005), pp. 127-158; Hosmer, one of Spark's most perceptive critics also edits a commendably diverse range of critical perspectives in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honour of Muriel Spark* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

[4] Although it should be noted that the name of the 'pisseur de copie' is taken from someone else who annoyed Spark, an American poetaster, Alice Hunt Bartlett (see *Curriculum Vitae*, pp.169-70).
[5] *Curriculum Vitae*, p.174.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] See, for instance, Macy Halford, 'Muriel Mysteries' in *The New Yorker* 26th April 2010: https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/muriel-mysteries
[8] For more detail of the Spark-Mackenzie relationship and that of the novelist with the magazine generally, see Lisa Harrison, '"The Magazine that is considered the best in the world": Muriel Spark and the *New Yorker*' in

David Herman (ed.), *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2010), pp.39-62.

[9] During 2017- 2018 Dr McIlroy curated an excellent exhibition at the NLS, 'The International Style of Muriel Spark' (https://www.nls.uk/exhibitions/muriel-spark), the materials of which have influenced a number of the essays in this collection beyond the Curator's own essay-contribution.

[10] An excellent starting point is made here by Benilde Montgomery in 'Spark and Newman: Jean Brodie Reconsidered' in *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 94-106.

[11] For Steven Harvie's doctoral project, see https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/postgrad/currentpgs/stevenharvie/

[12] For the University of Tulsa materials, see https://utulsa.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/2/resources/425

[13] Robin Jenkins, "A Truthful Scot." [interview] *In Scotland* Autumn 1999, p.12–22.

[14] Quoted in Alan Taylor, *Appointment in Arezzo: A friendship with Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2017), p.53.

[15] 'Spark: Macdiarmid's Poetry was Treason' (*The Sunday Times* 13th April 2003): https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spark-macdiarmids-poetry-was-treason-gfbhfzvvhzg

[16] For a consideration of Spark's 'Scottishness' see Gerard Carruthers, '"Fully to Savour Her Position': Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity' in *Modern Fiction Studies* (Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2008), pp.487-504. Spark has been written about from very different ends of the Scottish critical establishment. Alan Bold, a disciple of Hugh MacDiarmid writes his thematically incisive *Muriel Spark* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986) for the 'Contemporary Writers' series (another index of Spark's reputation, as the first Scot into this series). The British Unionist, Allan Massie (another fine novelist whose cultural and political credentials do not always find him a ready reception in Scotland) writes with great sympathy for Spark's stylistic panache in his *Muriel Spark* (Ramsay Head Press: Edinburgh, 1979) a volume in the publisher's series of 'New Assessments' of Scottish writers. Massie and Bold equally contribute to foregrounding Spark's Scottish cultural freight in way that was largely absent from previous treatments. The latter includes the former's 'Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark' in Bold (ed.) *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (London: Vision, 1984), pp. 94–107; other essays in that volume are also important in signalling Spark's Scottish heritage. Another place of acceptance for Spark within the Scottish canon is her treatment in another series in the volume, Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (eds.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

[17] Frank Kermode, 'House of Fiction' in *Partisan Review* XXX (Spring 1963), pp.61-82.

[18] Karl Malkoff, *Muriel Spark* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Patricia Stubbs, *Muriel Spark* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1973). Brian Cheyette's *Muriel Spark* (Northcote: Tavistock, 2000), with its very deft arrangement of critical concerns pursued through Spark's fiction, is a contribution to the updated 'Writers and Their Work' series.

[19] Collaterally, Tomás Monterrey in a path-breaking essay on Spark in European reception and translation in 'The Reception of Muriel Spark in Spain' (*Scottish Literary* Review, 11:1, Spring/Summer 2019, pp.85-102) offers intriguing insight into the appearance of translations of *Jean Brodie* and other Spark fictions in Spain under the dictator Franco and beyond.

[20] Interestingly, other Spark films, *The Driver's Seat* (1974) starring Elizabeth Taylor (1932-2011) and *The Abbess of Crewe* under the title *Nasty Habits* (1977) and starring Glenda Jackson (b.1936) enjoyed neither the popular nor critical success of the film of *Jean Brodie*. Much more celebrated as a screen adaptation has been the television series of *Memento Mori* (1992), featuring a stellar cast of actors including Maggie Smith. The time is ripe for proper critical work on Spark adaptation in film and television as well as, perhaps, on radio. There have also been mis-firings too, such as the aborted project to film, *The Takeover* (1976), Spark's sprawling satire on types of European decadence. See *The New York Times* (20th May, 1979), where Victoria Glendinning interviews Spark: http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/01/03/11/specials/spark-talk1.html

[21] See Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), pp.176-9, p.209 & p.233.

[22] Stannard, pp.162-3.

[23] Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Elek Books, 1974), p.16

[24] Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p.2. Although it might be said that angels appear comparatively rarely in Spark's fiction such as in her first published short story, 'The Seraph and the Zambesi' (1951) and here and elsewhere when good does appear it has a somewhat ambiguous effect such as in another short story 'The Black Madonna' (1958) where divine agency if that is what it is, is rather sinister. Good, of course, in its rather undramatic propensity is more difficult interestingly

to narrate than evil. Devils, or at least the devil manqué, such as Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, or even the 'witch' Jean Brodie are dramatized more readily.

[25] *Ibid*., p.120.

[26] Cairns Craig's, *Muriel Spark, Existentialism and the Art of Death* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[27] See, inter alia, Thomas F. Haddox, 'Religion for "Really Intelligent People": the Rhetoric of Muriel Spark's *Reality and Dreams*' in *Religion & Literature* Vol. 41, No. 3 (autumn 2009), pp. 43-66; Martin Stannard, 'Nativities: Muriel Spark, Baudelaire, and the Quest for Religious Faith' in *Review of English Studies* 55.218 (2004), pp. 91–105. Stephanie Jones, 'The "difficult" relationship: Christine Brooke-Rose, Catholicism and Muriel Spark' in *Textual Practice* (2018), 32:2, pp.245-263.

[28] Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[29] The phrase well-spotted by Alan Bold for the title of his collection of critical essays on Spark appears in Spark's poem, 'Elementary' (c.1951).

[30] Spark's formal range is completed by her children's short stories. Her one book for children is *The Very Fine Clock* (1969), but two other children's stories written around the same time were published latterly by Penelope Jardine in a limited edition for adult book-collectors, *The French Window* and *The Small Telephone* (1993).

[31] Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.42

[32] *Ibid*. pp.42-3.

[33] Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark* (London: Constable, 1992), p.155.

[34] Ian Rankin, 'Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*' in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 29 (1985), pp.146-55.

[35] This phrase is from Spark's poem, 'Verlaine Villanelle' (c.1950).