Time, Narrative Trickery and Truth in the Early Fiction of Muriel Spark

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Abstract

Using Wayne C. Booth's observations on modern narrative technique and, specifically, the notion of the unreliable narrator, this paper explores the strategies employed by Muriel Spark in three of her early novels, *The Comforters* (1957), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974). The use of omniscience and the controlling aspects of time and perspective, employed in different ways, are seen as essential tools in Spark's mission to reveal moral truth through the medium of fiction and to illustrate her specifically Catholic view of our fallen world. The paper concludes with the suggestion that, in the 21st century, a satirical vision such as Muriel Spark's might be frustrated and cease to be effective because of the dominance of 'fake news', 'alternative truth' and downright lies.

Keywords: Narrative, time, point- of-view, unreliable narrator, truth.

The triumph of realism and the predominance of the novel in nineteenth century literature suggests that, after the short period of Romantic self-expression, mimesis was, again, the guiding principal behind fiction and the representation and reorganization of the everyday with the aim of revealing a sense of order was the primary concern of most writers. However, with the advent of the twentieth century and psychological and political uncertainties things changed with the arrival of post-Modernist ideas. All the comforting tenets of Liberal Humanism which had underpinned the approach to literature started to unravel and universality, timelessness, detachment and sincerity no longer seemed as vital and natural as they once had been. The role of form began to challenge the pre-eminence of content and, whilst there was still a large body of opinion that subscribed to F. R. Leavis' view of a moral imperative behind fiction, a preoccupation with the way in which writing achieves its purpose increasingly became a concern of critical texts.

Much of early twentieth century critical opinion stemmed from the ideas and practices of Henry James who believed that the great strength of the novel

was the air of reality that it created and this could best be achieved by suppressing the presence of an omniscient author and replacing it with a character who becomes the centre of consciousness through whom everything is mediated with all the attendant human limitations that entails. The mantra for these critics became 'show me, don't tell me' and this was often as limiting as the old didactic ideas that had preceded it. Works of criticism which bore somewhat abstract titles such as *The Nature of Narrative* (Robert Scholes & Robert Kellogg), *The Language of Fiction* (David Lodge) and *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Wayne Booth) began to emerge in the 1960s and challenged some of the assumptions associated with impersonal and indirect narration in modern fiction which, at their worst had condemned some nineteenth century novelists for their tendency towards authorial intrusion. In his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne C. Booth, the George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago, took on notions such as 'true novels must be realistic', 'all authors should be objective' and 'true art ignores its audience' by starting from the premise that all works of narrative are communicative and not simply imitative or expressive and their rhetorical nature is essential to their meaning. In other words, fiction involves a man/woman communicating to other men/women and it is impossible for either to exist in isolation. The author's voice is always present whether or not it is acknowledged. Thus, impersonal narration and omniscience cannot be seen as simple opposites or clear alternatives since the author employing the impersonal mode knows more than his characters and, in just the same way as the omniscient author, the impersonal narrator cannot avoid the moral concerns often openly expressed by omniscient narrators because in dealing with human actions one cannot avoid their moral significance and even a refusal to make moral judgments is, in itself, a moral position.

Professor Booth came to the conclusion that the old categories used in analysing fiction, first-person, third-person, impersonal and omniscient, were no longer fit for purpose since they were too simplistic for the increasingly complex world of modern literature. He suggested that all works of fiction have an 'implied' author who is responsible for everything we see;

> "Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his nails" (Booth, 1961, p. 151).

So, this implied author can choose to remain detached or declare his/her presence; he /she can use a narrator or narrators, who can be participators or observers and these can be self-conscious or apparently unaware; but, most importantly, the almost limitless variety of narrators depends on the distance

between them and the implied narrator and audience and the other characters. The significance of Booth's contribution is that he goes on to describe what he believes to be the most significant type of narration in the modern age;

> For practical criticism probably the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator. If the reason for discussing point of view is to find how it relates to literary effects, then surely the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator are more important to our judgment than whether he is referred to as "I" or "he," or whether he is privileged or limited. If he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed (Booth, 1961, p. 158).

The term 'unreliable narrator" has become an indispensable concept in the discussion of modern fiction but as David Lodge points out in his review of *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* Professor Booth, whilst persuasively indicating the disadvantages of the modern mode of impersonal narration, seems reluctant to admit to those qualities of irony and ambiguity that are central characteristics of modern literature and are very much the essence of the narrative experimentation with unreliable narrators in modern novels and stories. It seems to Lodge that Wayne Booth only allows for one answer to the critical conundrums that are presented in works of literature; either the criticism is flawed or the confusion is built into the form of these works besides which 'the great traditional novels shine with intellectual and moral clarity'. Lodge concludes in a review that is largely complimentary;

> To this line of thought there are two substantial objections. The first is cultural or historical: that the modern novelist inhabits a world of confused and collapsed values where no absolute standards of truth or morality prevail, and irony and ambiguity are the natural and indeed inevitable artistic resources in this situation. The second objection is more fundamental: that irony and ambiguity are inherent in human experience and human discourse of any era —that in short, Professor Booth is using an over-simplified model of 'rhetoric' (Lodge, 1966, p. 6).

One novelist who was writing at the time of this debate and produced, in 1961, her most famous work, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* was the Scottish writer, Muriel Spark, who at the time produced several novels which exploited to the full the artistic potential of an unreliable narrator in a far more varied

guise than had been suggested by Booth. Her interest in the narrative potential of a guiding voice in fiction began at the outset of her career when she insisted that she was first and foremost a poet, considered the novel to be an "inferior way of writing" (Kermode, 1963, p. 79) and was determined that her first book should be one "to work out the technique first, to sort of make it all right with myself to write a novel at all —a novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel…" (Kermode, 1963, p. 79).

The writing of *The Comforters*, Spark's first novel, was undertaken at the time when she was received into the Roman Catholic Church and it is clear that her fictional aims had a close connection with her religious belief. She described how, her brain reeling with a confusion of ideas and near the point of breakdown, her acceptance of the Catholic Faith resulted in an ability to see things in perspective, her muddled thoughts blending into a coherent pattern; "I began to see life as a whole rather than a series of disconnected happenings" (Spark, 1961a, p. 63). A concept of order was the mainstay of both Mrs Spark's Faith and her fictional strategy, the latter involving the creation of deliberately artificial plots in which the reader's attention is directed away from the confusion which is an inevitable part of the Fallen World, towards the pattern which Mrs Spark, as a Catholic, believes underlies all of human existence. The parallel between the Catholic view of the world and that of the novelist is very close; humanity takes on the appearance of characters in the vast fiction which is life, constructing their destinies (or plots), with God (like an author) standing above with full knowledge of the beginning and the end. Concentrating upon small areas of society, the fictional world of Muriel Spark's novels becomes emblematic of the real one, every decision made by the characters placed in the context of the entire plot of which they are a part and presided over by the novelist, just as, according to Catholic belief, in reality all human choice is loaded with significance in an existence watched over by Divine Providence. The appearance of life as random, chaotic and absurd, only emphasises just how far our Fallen World has drifted from God, and through her deliberately artificial and technically untrue novels (which are nevertheless firmly bound to earth through her choice of settings and characters which are finely drawn facsimiles of the real world which surrounds us), Spark exhibits a particularly moral type of lying in order to display a sense of order and relevance which serves as a reflection of that more elusive, infinitely complex and often incomprehensible fiction which stems from God.

> I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges. And I keep in my mind specifically that what I am writing is fiction because I'm interested in truth – absolute truth – and I don't pretend that what I'm writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth – something

> inventive … what I write is not true – it is a pack of lies (Kermode, 1963, p. 180).

Like Muriel Spark, Caroline Rose, the heroine of *The Comforters* (the title alluding to the persecutors of Job in the Bible), has just emerged from the turmoil induced by her conversion and in the novel, through the use of a particularly tricky narrative voice, Spark manages to parallel the anguish of an independently-minded woman forced to curb her free will because of the dictates of her Faith, with the indignation of a character in a novel who gradually realises that she is at the mercy of an unknown irresponsible novelist. Here, it appears, the narrator who is, on the surface, a conventional third person omniscient voice, is embroiled in a war with his/her principal creation. Increasingly, Caroline becomes aware of voices and a tapping typewriter which echo and, more importantly, add to her thoughts and she bluntly declares, "I won't be involved in this fictional plot if I can help it… In fact, I'd like to spoil it. If I had my way I'd hold up the action of the novel. It's a duty" (Spark, 1961b, p. 117). She persists in "exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative" (Spark, 1961b, p. 155) even when the authorial hand conveniently incapacitates her in a hospital bed in an attempt to keep her out of the mainstream of events. Eventually, confirmed in her Faith and reconciled with her voices, she goes away to write a novel about characters in a novel.

Caroline's anguish is made particularly intense since, in her opinion (she is an expert writing a work entitled *Form in the Novel*), the plot in which she and her fellow characters are involved is a peculiarly unlikely one. She sees those around her imagining themselves to be free but simply collaborating with the irresponsible writer; as she points out to Laurence Manders, her ex-lover, his ideas are the result of "the influence of a novelist who is contriving some phony plot" (Spark, 1961b, p. 115) the minds of all the characters "working under the pressure of someone else's necessity" (Spark, 1961b, p. 115) and the whole affair resulting in "a cheap mystery piece" (Spark, 1961b, p. 115). Even before the voices jerk us (and Caroline) out of our sense of involvement with real people, Spark drops large hints to remind us that we are reading a novel. As early as the third paragraph our sense of involvement is disrupted;

> "He got some pleasure from having met with these facts, three hairpins, eight mothballs, a comb none too neat, the property of his grandmother, here in her home in Sussex, now in the present tense." (Spark, 1961b, p. 4)

The insistence of those last five words on the present nature of events has, in fact, the reverse effect; it destroys the illusion that we are watching the process of incidents actually taking place by reminding us that this is a novel where the fictional present is told in the past tense by someone who is aware of everything

that is to happen. Occasional phrases are inserted to remind us that we are reading fiction: Ernest Manders draws attention to punctuation during a conversation with Eleanor Hogarth, "Do modify your exclamation marks" (Spark, 1961b, p. 170): the tape recorder in Caroline's flat says "something funny but unprintable" (Spark, 1961b, p. 67) and the remark is omitted from the narrative; even Laurence is referred to as "the character called Laurence Manders" (Spark, 1961b, p. 231). As well as these frequent reminders, the fictional nature of the novel which we are reading is made explicit about a third of the way through the book, when the narrative suddenly erupts into, "At this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever" (Spark, 1961b, p. 74), the statement immediately being repeated to Caroline's consciousness by her voices (always denoted by italics) and leaving her "trembling in the darkening room" (Spark, 1961b, p. 74), considering "the new form of her suffering now that she was well again and committed to health" (Spark, 1961b, p. 74). The assertion of the fictional nature of the characters, whilst aggressively proved by Georgina Hogg, the overseer of The Pilgrim Centre of St Philumena, who is characterised by her huge bust and who, when alone, ceases to exist ["However, as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into her room she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever. God knows where she went in her privacy" (Spark, 1961b, p. 177)], throws one of the characters into a unique light.

Louisa Jepp, the seventy-eight year old grandmother who runs the smuggling gang, and around whom the 'phoney' plot centres, enjoys an authorial treatment which appears to contradict the assertions of the narrative and Caroline's voices. In spite of her privileged status, Louisa, denied the seemingly revelatory flashbacks and histories enjoyed by her peers, remains a thoroughly elusive and unknown quantity. She seems to be a gauge of normality among this cast of characters all driven by their peculiar obsessions and it is with the use of a time-shift (later to become one of Mrs Spark's favourite devices) that notice is given of Louisa Jepp's uniqueness. In chapter one, the old woman is taken from the fictional present and placed in what only can be described as a real present, corresponding with the time when the novel is being written. In the space of two paragraphs she is given a substantial reality embodying a past, a present and a future, which is denied to every other character. The résumé of her history is given in a blank authorial statement of fact;

> She was half-gypsy, the dark one and the youngest of a large red-haired family which at the time of her birth owed its prosperity to the father's success as a corn dealer. The success owing to good fortune in the first place, his having broken jail while waiting to

> come before the Bench, never afterwards returning to his gipsy-tribe. It was a hundred and thirty years after this event that Louisa was sitting down to breakfast with Laurence (Spark, 1961b, p. 6-7).

After the brief detailing of Louisa's origins, the narrative break from the location of the house in Ladle Sands 'in the present tense' and takes us forward into the future, which is, in fact, the real present;

> Louisa's hair remains black, though there is not much of it. She is short, and seen from the side especially, her form resembles a neat double potato just turned up from the soil with its small round head, its body from which hang the roots, her two thin legs below her full brown skirt and corpulence. Her face, from the front, is squared, receding in planes like a prism. The main lines on her face are deep, they must have been in gradual evidence since she was only thirty, they seem carved to the bone. But the little wrinkles are superficial, brushing the surface of her skin, coming and going like innumerable stars when she puckers a smile or unfolds a look of surprise. Her eyes are deep set and black. Her hands and feet very small. She wears rimless spectacles. She is still alive, not much changed from that day when Laurence came down to breakfast (Spark, 1961b, p. 7).

Once attracted to Louisa by use of the time-shift, we notice yet another special quality to this paragraph. Alone among the characters in *The Comforters* Louisa enjoys a detailed description by the author, in a peculiar cross between physical exactness and poetic licence (the imagery in this passage is yet another reason why it is highlighted); she is the only character we can visualize as a 'fact'. Mrs Hogg's appearance centres about her huge bosom, the emphasis placed upon this characteristic by Laurence and Caroline being taken up by the narrative voice and eventually filled out by one sentence of general description; "Her pale red-gold hair, round pale-blue eyes, her piglet ''flesh-coloured'' face" (Spark, 1961b, p. 156). Unlike Mrs Jepp, Georgina Hogg is patently false, obviously a fictional creation; even the attempt at flat description with its repetition of 'pale' and the use of the phrase 'flesh-coloured' emphasises her less than life-like appearance compounding her unreality. The members of Louisa's smuggling gang are described in a 'sleuth' like way through Laurence's consciousness and the little we know about Willi Stock and his appearance, suggesting mixed-blood, is received through Caroline. Surprisingly though, in spite of our accurate picture of Louisa and the narrative insistence that she exists as a real character outside the novel, we are never given any access to her thoughts; alerted to her special status we seem to come to a dead-end, apparently faced

with various cryptic remarks which are given no explanation through entry into her consciousness. Only once does a thought of Louisa's appear, during her meeting with Mrs Hogg, but it is a commonplace about the difference between Georgina's and her charwoman's appearance; "Louisa thought, 'My charwoman is turned out more ladylike, and yet this woman is of good family'" (Spark, 1961b, p. 122).

Caroline Rose's main objection to the plot in which she appears is that it is the result of ideas being put into the minds of those who surround her. Since we never gain access to Louisa's mind and since she appears infrequently, seeming altogether detached from the other characters, the implication seems to be that she escapes the control of the irresponsible novelist. Speaking to the Baron, Caroline passes a seemingly casual remark about Mrs Jepp; "'Well, she's an independent soul', said Caroline absently" (Spark, 1961b, p. 52). The last word, acting like a signal, warns us that the remark is anything but insignificant; Louisa is an independent soul, free from the obsessions, hypocrisies and self-deceptions which plague her fellow characters. A thoroughly unlikely character, she is, in fact, transformed into a norm amongst a group of people who remain isolated through their multitude of obsessions and short-comings. Revealed only through her words and deeds, Louisa is adept at manipulating events concerning her smuggling enterprise, often sitting back to watch the foibles and deceptions of the other characters in gentle amusement. Her ability to survey the scene with a humorous benevolence stems from a determination not to become involved in the neuroses of others, knowing these to be illusory, or to lay bare her thoughts to those who are totally immersed in their own obsessive problems. Through her detachment from the plot and her awareness of basic human nature (hence the symbolic importance of her penchant for pickling and preserving shellfish and intestines, believing "that people who went through life ignoring the inward vitals of shells and beasts didn't know what was good for them" (Spark, 1961b, p. 8), Louisa's opinions, albeit infrequently voiced, become accurate pointers to the limitations of others, exempting her from Caroline's perplexed observation upon the major participants of the novel; "Is the world a lunatic asylum then? Are we all courteous maniacs discreetly making allowances for everyone else's derangement?" (Spark, 1961b, p. 204)

It emerges that not only does Louisa have insight into the weaknesses of her fellow characters but also, though deprived of Caroline's voices, she possesses a certain knowledge of the workings of the plot. Towards the end of the book, a chapter after we learn of Mrs Hogg's habit of vanishing when alone, Louisa remarks to Laurence, "There are things about Mrs Hogg which you don't know" (Spark, 1961b, p. 203) and this is immediately followed by, "At a later time when Laurence learned of the relationship between Mrs Hogg and the Hogarths, he recalled this remark of his grandmother's and thought that was what she must have meant" (Spark, 1961b, p. 203). This seemingly unnecessary

narrative afterthought immediately leads us to suppose that what, in fact, Louisa was referring to is the most significant aspect of Mrs Hogg's character, the fact that she has no private life whatsoever and simply ceases to exist when alone. It is Louisa who illuminates Laurence's great weakness, inquisitiveness, which is obsessively displayed by him throughout the book; "Louisa laughed 'Oh, he never misses anything. I've never met anyone like him for getting the details. But, you know, the dear boy can't put two and two together'" (Spark, 1961b, p. 19). Louisa, with her primitive insight, demonstrates a temporal common sense which stands as a gauge by which others are judged; Georgina Hogg is a "poisonous woman" (Spark, 1961b, p. 26), Willi Stock is nice but "very stupid" (Spark, 1961b, p. 197), whilst Helena Manders is prey to an unbridled charity disastrously combining with a mistaken belief that she, like her mother, can accurately judge character.

Louisa's vision, however, is not limitless, her insistence upon the influence of luck in life and her assertion that "I daresay everything will come out all right" (Spark, 1961b, p. 22) are essentially earthbound. Whilst enjoying a belief in a type of providential order or fate, she does not, like Caroline, suffer from an awareness of the True Church which is "awful, though unfortunately one couldn't deny, true" (Spark, 1961b, p. 89). Independent and displaying Protestant virtues, Louisa is not troubled by disembodied voices and cannot be menaced by Mrs Hogg, the gargoyle who embodies all that is repulsive in Catholicism; "she won't trouble me that I know. She might try, but I shan't be troubled" (Spark, 1961b, p. 203). Mrs Jepp is, however, a useful guide to Caroline in the sense of detachment she must achieve in order to be thoroughly confirmed in her new Faith, this alienation from those around her manifesting itself in a growing revulsion at human contact. As with Louisa, however, who is at once separate and at the same time fully part of her world, Caroline's separation cannot be complete since this would reduce her to the same level as Edwin Manders, the recluse who is so hopelessly separated from the world that he no longer can, or is allowed to, cope with events around him.

Caroline's reconciliation with her voices is the acceptance of an authority which holds precedence over her individual will; the death of Georgina Hogg symbolises the rejection of all the revolting aspects of Catholicism which she embodies; and Caroline's determination to write her novel about characters in a novel is a sign of her resolution to ascertain the form of human existence beneath the morass of private obsession and the distorting mirror of reality. Through the use of the time-shift, in a novel much dependent upon coincidence and the neat dovetailing of events, Muriel Spark endows a minor character with a reality which contradicts the basic assertion of the narrative. Louisa Jepp, enjoying a privileged status and providing the common link between the varied cast, becomes like one of T.S. Eliot's guardians in plays such as *The Cocktail Party*, serving as a guide on the heroine's path to spiritual adulthood. This

blatantly fictional novel, which involves the creation of many spurious fictions by most of the obsessed characters in a narrative which spans just a year, becomes a symbol of the real world, itself a type of fiction presided over by God, its inhabitants blithely unaware of the significance of their actions and, for the most part, content to act out their self-created myths. Paradoxically, it is Louisa Jepp, the one character (apart from Caroline Rose, the novel's psychological centre) invested with a curious reality, who neatly rounds off the fiction with a conventionally happy ending. Her marriage to Mr Webster and the death of Mr Hogg fulfil Edwin Mander's requirement for the book which Caroline is to write, and which, perhaps, is the novel we have just read;

> "'Make it a straight old-fashioned story, no modern mystifications. End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine.' Caroline laughed and said, 'Yes, it would end that way.'" (Spark, 1961b, p. 231)

The implied narrator in *The Comforters* is a particularly elusive entity. The heroine, Caroline, from whose perspective we should be persuaded to view events is entirely out of sympathy with the plot in which she features. Indeed, she determinedly militates against the machinations of the narrative voice which seems set on producing a fiction that is unlikely, wilful and, occasionally, seemingly incompetent. Muriel Spark's first adventure into fiction may have been lauded as an early example of metafiction but its purpose was far from the desire for literary whimsy. The unreliable narrator equates with God and Caroline's objections and protests are the declarations of a lost being in a Fallen World. We cannot see or understand the pattern of events of which we are a part but only through humility and acquiescence to Providence can we achieve some measure of peace; or to put it another way, only by submitting to the will of the narrative voice can we see the resolution of our fictional world.

The events in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* occur in the 1930s and in place of the irresponsible and often contradicted narrator of *The Comforters* we are presented with by a clearly all-knowing, all-seeing, third-person narrative voice but one which is conditioned by the dominant perspective of yet another edgy Sparkian outsider, aptly named Sandy Stranger. The novel is firmly located against the historical background of the rise of Fascism in the Calvinist society of Edinburgh, a time and place redolent of intolerance and elitism. However, the events we witness and the characters involved are made more profound by multiple time shifts that make them anything but straightforward and control our emotional response to them. As Spark said to Philip Toynbee ten years after the emergence of Miss Brodie

> I'm tremendously against the kind of literature which is making a constant appeal to our emotional sympathy. What happens when the sympathies and the imagination of a modern audience are aroused by a play or a novel of the kind I am talking about? I suspect a great number of the audience or of the readers feel their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they've been induced to feel. (Toynbee, 1971, p. 74)

and it seems as if the sense of detachment and objectivity that was urged on Caroline Rose is, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* being pushed on to the reader by the narrative method. The story of the eccentric Miss Brodie and her 'set' is a compelling one that was turned into a successful film using a conventional sequential narrative but (as David Lodge has pointed out) the novel with its time shifts that give away the plot in advance and focus the reader's attention on aspects which would pass unnoticed in a chronological presentation, together with the modifying and dominant point-of-view of Sandy Stranger, makes everything far from obvious and transforms the tale into one with several meanings beneath the surface events of the plot (Lodge, 1966, p. 136).

The novel opens in 1936 when the 'Brodie set' is in the fourth form of the senior school, four years since it was the select group of Miss Brodie's class and directly under her influence. The first four pages of chapter one briefly outline the nature of this elite, its relationship with the rest of the school and, finally, its individual members, each of whom is famous for something at the age of sixteen. With our introduction to this supposedly uniform clique, however, we are made aware of the individuality which underlies and threatens the group identity (for instance, by the way in which each girl wears her school panama and the precarious nature of their loyalty when they occasionally mock a member of the group). After this brief introduction, the narrative retreats, quite conventionally, six years to the girls' first term as Miss Brodie's class and the genesis of the 'Brodie set'; thus, the fictional present having been established as 1936, is followed, unsurprisingly, by a lengthy retrospect which details the growth of the set, its relationship with Miss Brodie and those events which lead up to the opening of the novel. At the end of the chapter, however, the narrative takes a dramatic turn, when, amidst this flashback, we learn of the eventual death of one of the girls at the age of twenty-three;

> "Mary Macgregor, lumpy, with merely two eyes, a nose and mouth like a snowman, who was later famous for being stupid and always to blame and who, at the age of twenty-three, lost her life in a hotel fire, …" (Spark, 1961c, pp. 13-14).

Within the first chapter we are presented with three time levels; the description of Mary Macgregor in her tenth year looking forward to her fame at sixteen (the fictional present established at the opening) and, then, to her death seven years later (In the future). This is the first of several glimpses we have of the future, allowing us the privilege of authorial omniscience whilst the characters remain locked in ignorance of their fate, bound by the plot in which they exist. The climax of the novel, in the closing pages of the book, is the betrayal of Miss Brodie; yet this betrayal comes as no surprise to us since we have already been told of it by an adult Eunice Gardner (talking to her husband in 1959);

> Her retirement was rather a tragedy, she was forced to retire before time. The head never liked her. There's a long story attached to Miss Brodie's retirement. She was betrayed by one of her own girls, we were called the Brodie set. I never found out which one betrayed her. (Spark, 1961c, p. 32)

Even the identity of the traitor is not kept in doubt since, half way through the novel, we are brought forward to 1946 (the year of Miss Brodie's death) to a conversation between the teacher and Sandy Stranger at the Braid Hill Hotel, where all is revealed;

> "'The whine in her voice -' … betrayed me, betrayed me' – bored and afflicted Sandy. It is seven years, thought Sandy, 'since I betrayed this tiresome woman. What does she mean by 'betray'?'" (Spark, 1961c, p. 78).

It is scenes such as these, viewing the girls in adulthood and the defeated Miss Brodie, which throw the plot into a new light so that the centre of interest is not what happens but how it happens and, most importantly of all, why.

Also, the omniscient narrator frequently breaks from the conventional pattern of presentation with explanatory flashbacks into these glimpses of the future which give the novel a providential mood where minor characters are allowed a degree of attention that creates the impression that their lives follow a pattern decided in childhood. At the beginning of chapter two, immediately after we learn of Mary Macgregor's death, the narrative jumps to 1943 and her final panic in a hotel fire; however, seventy-five pages later, the reader experiences the curious sensation of déjà-vu during an incident in the science laboratory in the girls' first term at senior school, a curiously inverted prefiguration (since the chronologically earlier incident is anticipated by the later fatal one);

> Eventually, from different parts of the room, great white magnesium flares shot out of the test-tubes and were caught in larger glass vessels which waited for the purpose. Mary Macgregor took fright and ran along a single lane between two benches, met with a white flame, and ran back to meet another brilliant tongue of fire. Hither and thither she ran in panic between the benches until she was caught and induced to calm down …. (Spark, 1961c, p. 100)

Similarly, we are told in chapter one that Monica Douglas was famous for her anger and, during the account of the girls early schooldays we are given evidence of this in her furious reaction to her having her report of Miss Brodie's and Teddy Lloyd's embrace disbelieved and, later through a flash-forward to her visit to Sandy in the convent, this anger is seen to be the cause of disaster in her adult life;

> Monica Douglas came to visit Sandy because there was a crisis in her life. She had married a scientist and in one of her fits of temper had thrown a live coal at his sister. Whereupon the scientist demanded a separation, once and for all. (Spark, 1961c, p. 162)

Rose Stanley, we are told, was famous for sex at sixteen and this instinct is seen to have its roots five years earlier at the beginning of her time at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls during the observation of a walk through old Edinburgh;

> By her [Monica Douglas] side walked Rose Stanley, tall and blonde with a yellow-pale skin, who had not yet won her reputation for sex, and whose conversation was all about trains, cranes, motor cars, Meccanos and other boys' affairs … She was also an energetic climber of walls and trees. And although these concerns at Rose Stanley's eleventh year marked her as a tomboy, they did not go deep into her femininity and it was her superficial knowledge of these topics alone, as if they had been a conscious preparation, which stood her in good stead a few years later with the boys. (Spark, 1961c, p. 33)

It is this instinct, we are led to believe, that protects Rose from the machinations of Miss Brodie in her plan for the affair with Teddy Lloyd and, eventually, as the narrative informs us with a glimpse into the future, leads her to make "a good marriage soon after she left school" (Spark, 1961c, p. 159) and allows her to shake "off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat" (Spark, 1961c, p. 159).

Though the narrative voice, with its shifts of perspective between adulthood and childhood, gives added depth to the characters and an inkling of the workings of Providence, it is the relationship between Miss Brodie and Sandy Stranger, through whose eyes we see much of what happens, that is the central interest of the novel. At first, there seems to be an unusually determined attempt to prevent our emotional identification with the 'eyes' of the novel coupled with a strategy to present Miss Brodie as a flamboyant and ambiguous enigma. Initially, the teacher is presented as an attractive personality whilst Sandy with her tiny 'pig-like' eyes (Spark, 1961c, p. 12) and unpleasant nature (seen deliberately getting the unfortunate Mary Macgregor into trouble on at least two occasions) deviously contemplates the consequences of being nice to Mary and "the possibilities of feeling nice from being nice to Mary" (Spark, 1961c, p. 36). However, Sandy, initially portrayed as self-seekingly unsavoury, is eventually seen to be prey to a child's fear of becoming an outcast if she shows sympathy for the butt of all blame and the scapegoat of the Brodie set and her innocently confused predicament is placed alongside Miss Brodie's adult and morally culpable arrogance;

> Sandy looked back at her companions, and understood them as a body with Miss Brodie for the head. She perceived herself, the absent Jenny, the ever-blamed Mary, Rose, Eunice and Monica, all in a frightening little moment, in unified compliance to the destiny of Miss Brodie, as if God had willed them to birth for that purpose. (Spark, 1961c, p. 36)

It is Miss Brodie's presence that arrests Sandy's instinct to be nice and, within five pages, the narrative leaps forward to her middle age and her objections and debt to her teacher are made clear. The narrative tells us that Sandy eventually becomes, Sister Helena, a nun in an enclosed order and famous for a treatise on moral perception entitled 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace'. During an interview she acknowledges her debt to her teacher;

> 'The influences of one's teens are very important,' said the man.
> 'Oh yes,' said Sandy, 'even if they provide something to react against.'
> 'What was your biggest influence, then, Sister Helena? Was it political, personal? Was it Calvinism?'
> 'Oh no,' said Sandy. 'But there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.' (Spark, 1961c, pp. 42-43)

It is Sandy, the girl on whom Miss Brodie has the most lasting and significant influence, who betrays her. Eunice Gardner later sees Miss Brodie as an

"Edinburgh Festival all her own" (Spark, 1961c, p. 31) and Mary Macgregor, the outcast, in one of her moments of misery, feels the years with Miss Brodie "sitting listening to all those stories and opinions which had nothing to do with the ordinary world, had been the happiest time of her life" (Spark, 1961c, p. 15) but Sandy's response leads directly to her conversion, the adoption of the religious life and the writing of her treatise. Jean Brodie embodies the group spirit but the implied jealousy which goes along with it is what Sandy feels she has to reject politically;

> It occurred to Sandy, there at the end of the middle Meadow Walk, that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along. That was all right, but it seemed, too, that Miss Brodie's disapproval of the Girl Guides had jealousy in it, there was an inconsistency, a fault. Perhaps the Guides were too much a rival fascisti, and Miss Brodie could not bear it. (Spark, 1961c, p. 36)

Miss Brodie also embodies the spirit of Calvinism, a birthright Sandy is deprived of but feels the need to reject and which pervades the Scotland of her childhood;

> In fact, it was the religion of Calvin of which Sandy felt deprived, or rather a specified recognition of it. She desired this birthright; something definite to reject. It pervaded the place in proportion as it was unacknowledged. In some ways the most real and rooted people whom Sandy knew were Miss Gaunt and the Kerr sisters who made no evasions about their belief that God had planned for practically everybody before they were born a nasty surprise when they died. Later, when Sandy read John Calvin, she found that although popular conceptions of Calvinism were sometimes mistaken, in this particular there was no mistake, indeed it was but a mild understanding of the case, he having made it God's pleasure to implant in certain people an erroneous sense of joy and salvation, so that their surprise at the end might be nastier. (Spark, 1961c, pp. 144-145)

Sandy recognises that it is Calvinism that distinguishes Miss Brodie from the "legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties" (Spark, 1961c, p. 52) but, in her case, instead of "crowding her war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion" (Spark, 1961c, p. 52). Miss Brodie has decided to

cultivate her clique through whom she can shine vicariously. Because of her plans to have Rose Stanley sleep with Teddy Lloyd and her disastrous encouragement of Joyce Emily Hammond to fight for the Nationalists in Spain it becomes apparent to Sandy that she must be stopped; "She thinks she is providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (Spark, 1961c, p. 161).

At the time, Sandy cannot see the absurd side to Miss Brodie, who cannot, as she consistently proves, see "the beginning and the end" (Spark, 1961c, p. 48). In spite of her assuredly proclaiming "I do not think ever to be betrayed" (Spark, 1961c, p. 48) the reader is fully aware already that this will be the case, and as early as chapter two, we are forewarned of Miss Brodie's error in believing that her arranged affair between Rose Stanley and Teddy Lloyd has been successful; "In fact, Rose was not at the time in question engaged in the love affair which Miss Brodie thought she was, but it seemed so, and Rose was famous for sex" (Spark, 1961c, p. 47). Of course, the reader has the advantage over Sandy through the privileged glimpses of the future but even she ought to recognise Miss Brodie's absurdity in her affair with Gordon Lowther. Faced with imputations of immorality over her affair with the singing master, Jean Brodie declares "I have been all things to Gordon Lowther, and I need only lift my little finger and he would be at my side … If I wished I could marry him tomorrow" (Spark, 1961c, p. 151), yet in the following paragraph (bringing us on to the next day) we learn of the announcement in 'The Scotsman' of Mr. Lowther's engagement to Miss Lockhart, the science mistress. Miss Brodie's reaction to this announcement is typical and reveals the dangerous aspect of her character; thinking herself to be Providence, yet so often wrong, she refuses to learn from her mistakes merely transferring her attention to the manipulation of someone else's destiny;

> Miss Brodie was greatly taken aback and suffered untimely, for a space, from a sense of having been betrayed. But she seemed to recall herself to the fact that the true love of her life was Teddy Lloyd whom she had renounced; and Gordon Lowther had merely been useful. (Spark, 1961c, p. 151)

It is partly an overreaction to Miss Brodie's influence which drives Sandy to betray her (though the death of Joyce Emily Hammond, paradoxically not one of the set, is excuse enough) and it is not until middle-age that she can take a more balanced view of her teacher;

> All the time they were under her influence she and her actions were outside the context of right and wrong. It was twenty-five years before Sandy had so far recovered from a creeping vision of

> disorder that she could look back and recognise that Miss Brodie's defective sense of self-criticism had not been without its beneficent and enlarging effects; by which time Sandy had already betrayed Miss Brodie and Miss Brodie was laid in her grave. (Spark, 1961c, pp. 113-114)

The time setting of the novel is crucial and it is no coincidence that Miss Brodie's rise and fall should parallel the careers of the great dictators. Her prime (and influence on the girls) begins in 1930, when the Fascists were becoming a powerful force in Europe; her strength and power grows until 1936, when she achieves her most obvious triumph of will in the wooing away of Joyce Emily Hammond from the Republican to the Nationalist cause in the Spanish Civil War. Ironically, her most apparent success comes through her influence over the new girl who has been excluded from the set, but it is a pyrrhic victory since Joyce Emily's death is the deciding factor in Sandy's resolution to put a stop to Miss Brodie. Franco's triumph in the Spanish Civil War was the one permanent Fascist victory, yet it demonstrated to a few the real menace of Fascism, similarly, Sandy sees the affair of Joyce Emily's conversion to the Nationalist cause as the visible proof of Miss Brodie's fanaticism and the signal to betray her. The outbreak of war in 1939 coincides with Miss Brodie's dismissal but it is not until 1946, with the last of the hostilities, that she dies from cancer [which is ambiguously referred to as "an internal growth" (Spark, 1961c, p. 72) deliberately suggesting that other internal growth, which is spiritual grace]. The element of Fascism in Miss Brodie which is emphasised through the historical setting of the novel is broadened to include a spirit that pervades the city and its traditions and is seen as a type of spiritual Fascism, its adherents subscribing to a belief in predestination and spiritual election. The combination of Fascist and Calvinist in Miss Brodie mingles with a temperament "suited only to the Roman Catholic Church" (Spark, 1961c, p. 113) which possibly "could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit" (Spark, 1961c, p. 113) and might even "have normalised her" (Spark, 1961c, p. 113) rather than to have produced the belief that she was not merely one of the elect, but Providence itself, empowered to control the destinies of those whom she selected, thus usurping the prerogative of God. The God of nasty surprises which Sandy recognizes in later life as an essential part of Calvinism, however, is peculiarly vindicated in Miss Brodie's betrayal, the one thing she is certain will not happen yet which she forces upon her betrayer.

Although the novel can be seen as a portrait of the tumultuous pre-war world in microcosm, to view it simply as an historical analogy is to ignore its deeper meanings. With our knowledge of the evils of Nazism, a satire upon the consequences of a Fascist mentality would be a particularly empty exercise, the

historical reality condemning it with greater force than fiction ever could. However, the connexion forged between Fascism and Calvinism brings the novel from the plane of social comment to a wider theological and philosophical level. With the narrative voice assuming the eyes of the growing Sandy, the virtues and evils of the world distil in the figure of Jean Brodie; she is at once both the summit and the depths of humanity, the novel remaining insistent that the qualities and failings which she personifies exist against the background of a Fallen World. Miss Brodie, with her "excessive lack of guilt" (Spark, 1961c, p. 113) and "defective sense of self-criticism" (Spark, 1961c, p. 114), possesses a dangerous innocence which, when not tempered by the reality of a fallen world, leads to the death of one of her pupils and demands her betrayal. Her comment after the atrocities of Nazism that Hitler "*was* rather naughty" (Spark, 1961c, p. 164) displays a childlike ignorance which proves to be her fatal flaw and ultimately outweighs all her virtues. Her only hope, it is suggested, would have been in the Catholic Church, yet, as we see in Sandy, eventually Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, this is no guarantee of contentment. The impression we are left with is of a necessarily though regrettably betrayed Miss Brodie and the powerful image of her betrayer, not immured from the world in spiritual repose like her fellow nuns, not basking in the contentment of a justified act, but clutching at "the bars of the grille as if she wanted to escape from the dim parlour beyond" (Spark, 1961c, p. 43) her sharp eyes now faint, and obviously ill at ease in the Catholic Church among whose "ranks she had found quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie" (Spark, 1961c, p. 168).

Having employed a third person narrative voice that can leap through time in its presentation of events in order to reveal the author's clear vision of the underside of human existence and the moral truth that underpins apparently chaotic lives at a time of moral crisis, after a series of fictions that dabbled with degrees of omniscience, Muriel Spark's satire located in the provincial world of the Catholic Church employs a fully-fledged omniscient voice that permits no mitigating point of view. It does not take extraordinary powers of perception to realise that *The Abbess of Crewe* is based upon the Watergate scandal, Nixon and his fellow conspirators, principally Haldeman, Erlichman and Dean, all finding their counterparts in the unlikely setting of a "quaint convent, quasi-Benedictine, quasi–Jesuit" (Spark, 1974, p. 42) that has "already discarded its quasi-natures" (Spark, 1974, p. 42) under the previous Lady Abbess, and is now "a mutation and an established fact" (Spark, 1974, p. 42). The elaborate fiction which emanated from Washington in 1974, absurd in its intent and incompetent in its execution, would seem to have posed a potential threat to a novelist such as Mrs Spark, whose ultimate concern was to expose the ridiculous nature of our world. However, in transferring the action of Watergate to an enclosed community of nuns in Crewe and clothing her conspirators in religious habits,

Muriel Spark accepted the challenge of her White House rivals and at the same time stood by her long held belief that if fiction 'is not stranger than truth, it ought to be'. In *The Abbess of Crewe* Mrs Spark employs a present tense narrative form, the action opening in the middle of the 'cover-up' operation and (in chapter two) takes us back in time to the election of the new Abbess and the height of the 'dirty tricks' campaign (thus paralleling the sequence in which the Watergate scandal was revealed). The constant present tense combines with a particularly devious authorial voice in order to highlight the outrageous aspirations of the main character, providing us with an insight which transfigures "a marvellously telling satire into a luminous and universal parable" (Spark, 1974, cover blurb).

Sister Alexandra who is "forty-two in her own age with fourteen generations of pale and ruling ancestors of England, and ten before them of France, carved also into the bones of her wonderful head" (Spark, 1974, p.10) is very much in her prime, and in her egotistical desire to achieve her destiny by whatever deceitful and scandalous route, is a dazzling re-incarnation of Jean Brodie. In the earlier novel about the charismatic and irresponsible school teacher the presence of Sandy Stranger, through whose eyes we see most of the action, provided us with a sceptical viewpoint by which we could judge Miss Brodie's behaviour; in *The Abbess of Crewe* however, the tactic is completely reversed. Not only is there no independent character who can help us to form an opinion about Sister Alexandra (and who, like Sandy Stranger, might finally put a stop to her), on the contrary, the whole tone of the narrative seems deliberately to endorse Alexandra's monstrous arrogance, apparently condoning every lie, deception and cynical manipulation in her rise to power. From the outset, Alexandra, "soaring in her slender height, a very Lombardy poplar" (Spark, 1974, p. 9), is approvingly placed above the common horde, at the top of the convent's hierarchical order which consists of "high nuns, low nuns, choir nuns, novices and nobodies, fifty in all" (Spark, 1974, p. 15). According to the narrative voice, reflecting Sister Alexandra's opinion, even Winifrede, the destined scapegoat in the whole intrigue ["Be that as it may, Winifrede is in it up to her neck, and the scandal stops at Winifrede" (Spark, 1974, p. 22)], who speaks in a 'blurting voice, indignant as any common Christian's, a sing-song lament' (Spark, 1974, p. 10), is 'almost intelligent-looking' (Spark, 1974, p. 62) as she reads to the assembled company who mindlessly eat their sieved nettles and mashed potatoes (Spark, 1974, p. 60);

> A less edifying crowd of human life it would be difficult to find; either they have become so or they always were so; at any rate, they are in fact a very poor lot, all the more since they do not think so for moment… (Spark, 1974, p. 61)

Having cheated her way to power and thus made worthwhile her "mother's labour pains" (Spark, 1974, p.40), Alexandra views the convent as her property, the tool of destiny, and the narrative glowingly endorses this;

> "What a piece of work is her convent, how distant its newness from all the orthodoxies of the past, how far removed in its antiquities from those of the present!" (Spark, 1974, p. 12).

Whilst conscious of the limiting nature of humanity ["Sisters, I am consumed by the Divine Discontent. We are made a little lower than the angels. This weighs upon me, because I am a true believer" (Spark, 1974, p. 43)] Alexandra, like Jean Brodie, presumes to the power of God, parodying the account of the Creation in Genesis;

> The Abbess from her high seat looks with a kind of wonder at her shadowy chapel of nuns, she listens with a fine joy to the keen plainchant, as if upon a certain newly created world. She contemplates and sees it is good. Her lips move with the Latin of the psalm. She stands before her high chair as one exalted by what she sees and thinks, as it might be she is contemplating the full existence of the Abbess of Crewe. (Spark, 1974, p. 35)

During the account of the campaign which leads to her election we are never in any doubt that Alexandra will be the new Abbess, her victory and Felicity's flight "to join her Jesuit lover and to tell her familiar story to the entranced world" (Spark, 1974, p. 20) already having been revealed in chapter one. The combination of the consistent present tense forever anticipating a known future and the blending of the authorial voice with Alexandra's point of view, however, makes it quite clear that she too is fully confident of the outcome, thus seeming to render futile her elaborate system of electronic surveillance, her secret pact with the Jesuits and her involved network of deceptions. Alexandra's certainty that she will triumph is the product of her own arrogant egotism, the name of destiny merely glamorising what is in fact no more than wilful ambition which she makes sure will be realised by a spectacular display of ingenious cheating. Alexandra's election is the essential part of the drama which she is determined to construct with herself as the leading character and the focus of all attention; deciding that the reality of the world is unacceptable, she distorts facts to suit her own solipsistic pattern, and submits all to her will in the creation of a self-centred myth;

> 'It is absurd in modern times that the nuns should have to get up twice in the middle of the night to sing the Matins and the Lauds.

> But modern times come into a historical context, and as far I'm concerned history doesn't work. Here, in the Abbey of Crewe, we have discarded history. We have entered the sphere, dear Sisters, of mythology. My nuns love it. Who doesn't yearn to be part of a myth at whatever the price in comfort? The monastic system is in revolt throughout the rest of the world, thanks to historical development. Here, within the ambience of mythology, we have consummate satisfaction, we have peace'. (Spark, 1974, p. 20)

With a grounding in Classics and "Eng. Lit." (Spark, 1974, p. 24) at Lady Margaret Hall, Alexandra sees herself and her fellow conspirators as characters in a Greek tragedy, beyond the restraints of both Church and State;

> 'We can't be excommunicated without the facts. As for the legal aspect, no judge in the kingdom would admit the case, let Felicity tell it like it was as she may. You cannot bring a charge against Agamemnon or subpoena Clytemnestra, can you?' (Spark, 1974, p. 25)

Believing most of humanity to be considerably more naïve and less intelligent than herself, Alexandra realizes that the greater the chaos she manages to create ["The more truths and confusions the better" (Spark, 1974, p. 26)] and the more stylish will be the ultimate effect, worthy of "Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides" (Spark, 1974, p. 24). In a world steeped in folly Alexandra considers it perfectly permissible to construct her own 'scenarios' which, though 'based on facts' do not have to be plausible, "only hypnotic, like all good art" (Spark, 1974, p. 106); as she tells the uncomprehending Winifrede, "a good scenario is a garble" (Spark, 1974, p. 106) and in her deft interweaving of truth and lies, Alexandra produces a 'garble' which ensures her election, confuses Rome, entertains the world and reduces all around her to a dwarfish stature.

The world of *The Abbess of Crewe* is an enticingly amoral one where the contest between the rival candidates for the Abbess' crozier becomes a matter of style rather than one of spiritual suitability. In her dexterous handling of such a world and with her flair for propaganda, Alexandra completely overshadows her rival, the "common little thing" (Spark, 1974, p. 47) who was only tolerated by the late Abbess Hildegarde because "it befitted a Christian to tolerate" (Spark, 1974, p. 42). Holding the clause of the Ancient Rule which deems laughter to be unseemly as "the least outmoded" (Spark, 1974, p. 48) and "the most adapted to the urgency of our time" (Spark, 1974, p. 48), Felicity is a grim advocate of free-love;

> 'Love,' says Felicity as they all take up their work again, 'and love-making are very liberating experiences, very. If I were the Abbess of Crewe, we should have a love-Abbey. I would destroy that ungodly electronics laboratory and install a love-nest right in the heart of this Abbey, right in the heart of England'. (Spark, 1974, p. 50)

It is not the immorality of Felicity's affair with her Jesuit lover, Father Thomas, which condemns her and provides Alexandra with the means by which to defeat her, but the fact that such behaviour displays a distinct want of style, which transforms Felicity into an "interesting sort of genetic mutation" (Spark, 1974, p. 87) and, in spite of her fine lineage, irredeemably boorish. Felicity's lack of style in the conduct of her love affair ["Only the beautiful should make love when they are likely to be photographed" (Spark, 1974, p. 56)] is merely emphasized by her reaction to the 'break-in', her election campaign deteriorating into an absurd game of hunt the thimble and, finally, after her defeat, her recourse to a psychiatrist underlines for Alexandra her rival's unsuitability in a world where outward appearance and dramatic effect are of paramount importance;

> 'Anxiety is for the bourgeoisie and for great artists in those hours when they are neither asleep nor practising their art. An aristocratic soul feels no anxiety … Sisters, let me tell you a secret, I would rather sink fleshless to my death into the dry soil of some African or Indian plain, dead of hunger with the rest of the dying skeletons than go, as I hear Felicity is now doing, to a psychiatrist for an anxiety-cure.' (Spark, 1974, p. 97)

Sex is perfectly acceptable to Alexandra as long as it is not indiscreet like Felicity's antics; indeed, once elected Abbess, she intends to return to the old system of double-monasteries where "the nuns will have each her Jesuit" (Spark, 1974, p. 57) and where everything will be "so discreet and so well ordered" (Spark, 1974, p. 57). It is with the same type of 'double-think' mentality where "a difference of degree implies a difference in kind" (Spark, 1974, p. 33) that Alexandra uses the Rule and the Scriptures to excuse her behaviour whilst demanding obedience from her nuns, requiring them "to obey the commands of the Abbess in everything, even though she herself should unfortunately act otherwise" (Spark, 1974, p. 18), combining the Rule with excerpts from Machiavelli which warn of her devious machinations but which she knows will not touch the clouded minds of the dull-witted community;

> "'Here endeth the reading,' Winifrede says, looking stupidly round the still more stupid assembly, into whose ears the words have come and from which they have gone." (Spark, 1974, p. 63)

An outrageous monomaniac, Alexandra manages to remain the most charismatic and attractive figure in the convent of Crewe, a place which becomes a neat and disturbing replica of our own corrupt and aggressively fallen world. At the beginning of chapter two we are informed that "God is in his heaven" (Spark, 1974, p. 37) yet throughout *The Abbess of Crewe* the suggestion is firmly implanted that, in being so, God is safely out of the way, and largely irrelevant to the events taking place except for the occasional invocation of His name in the cause of electioneering. In her spectacular address to the community, appealing to their "lower instincts" (Spark, 1974, p. 83), Alexandra makes it quite clear that the central issue of the campaign has nothing whatever to do with spiritual worth;

> 'Sisters, be sober, be vigilant. I don't speak of morals, but of ethics. Our topics are not those of sanctity and holiness, which rest with God; it is a question of whether you are ladies or not, and that is something we decide.' (Spark, 1974, p. 90)

In extracting a confession from the unwilling Winifrede, in the form of the 'Confiteor', Alexandra emphasizes man's fallen state, at the same time highlighting the nun's casual forgetfulness of this fact;

> 'Well, you know,' says the Abbess, 'since you repeat these words at Mass every morning of your life, I would be quite horrified to think you had been a hypocrite all these years and hadn't meant them … Even the Pope,' says the Abbess 'offers the very same damaging testimony every morning of his life; he admits quite frankly that he has committed sins exceedingly all through his own grievous fault.' (Spark, 1974, p. 119)

It is in the system of electronic surveillance, which Alexandra excuses as part of the paradox of Faith, however, that the absence of God from the characters' thoughts is most apparent, habit and familiarity breeding forgetfulness and contempt;

> Upstairs and far away in the control room the recorders, activated by their voices, continue to whirl. So very much elsewhere in the establishment do the walls have ears that neither Mildred nor Walburga are now conscious of them as they were when the

> mechanics were first installed. It is like being told, and all the time knowing, that the Eyes of God are upon us; it means everything and therefore nothing. The two nuns speak as freely as the Jesuits who suspect no eavesdropping device more innocuous than God to be making a chronicle of their present privacy. (Spark, 1974, p. 68)

Amongst these insipid characters whose lives are a pattern of unthinking "wrongdoing" (Spark, 1974, p. 112) and who only exhibit "a trace of individualism" (Spark, 1974, p. 73) in their discontent at "sheer waste of sensation" (Spark, 1974, p. 73), only Alexandra stands out through her gleeful recognition of the loss of primal innocence and a wilful determination to sin with supreme skill;

> 'We are corrupt by our nature in the Fall of Man,' Alexandra says. 'It was well exclaimed by St. Augustine, 'O happy fault to merit such a Redeemer! O felix culpa!'
> 'Amen', respond the three companions.
> They start to descend the stairs. 'O happy flaw!' says Alexandra. (Spark, 1974, p. 58)

With Felicity leaking new sensations to the media from her love-nest in Earl's Court, all the conspirators (with the predictable exception of Winifrede who is arrested in a men's lavatory) seem to escape the full effect of the scandal and the deserved consequences of their dishonest careers. Maximilian and Baudoin (the Jesuits) flee to America to become engaged upon a highly lucrative lecture tour, speaking on ecclesiastical stage management and demonology; Mildred and Walburge retire to safe oblivion in the Abbey of Ynce finding it "necessary to reorganise the infirmary" (Spark, 1974, p. 127); and Gertrude, who was always careful to avoid implication in the Abbess' dealings, smugly remains in Tibet, as far as possible from Crewe and, of course, Rome. Alexandra, however, having achieved her ambition to become "an object of art, the end of which is to give pleasure" (Spark, 1974, p. 125), is summoned to the Vatican and we are left with the vision of this "rare Abbess of Crewe" (Spark, 1974, p. 127) setting sail for the confrontation with the Hierarchy, confident in her ability to plead her cause with the highest degree of panache. The persistent tone of authorial approval reaches its zenith in the heroic lyricism of the final paragraph, emphasizing the point which Muriel Spark is making through her apparently whimsical re-enactment of Watergate, a point which was noticed by only a few of the novel's reviewers;

> By one of those paradoxes that Mrs Spark enjoys so much the convent becomes the vile epitome of the world outside, the battleground where individual values get brutally processed into

> myth – where you can *see* that history is sin, and the only heroism is to sin in style. (Sage, 1974, p. 33)

Muriel Spark's witty distortion of a most spectacular real scandal, her cunning use of the authorial voice and the present tense narrative, and the consummate ease with which she mixes the dignified language which aspires to higher things, both religious and literary, with the gutter invective of unscrupulous politicians, all make *The Abbess of Crewe* a stylish scenario worthy of its charismatic subject. Similar though Mrs Spark and Alexandra may be in their method of creating fictions, however, it is a mistake to believe (as some critics have done) that this novel's aim is the same delightful pointlessness as that of Alexandra's corrupt machinations. Though both the Abbess and her creator are accomplished liars, this religious Watergate is yet another reminder of Mrs Spark's tactic of distorting reality in order that she may reveal the true nature of man's existence in a Fallen World. Whether her subjects be schoolgirls or nuns, or her settings located in Surrey, Edinburgh or Crewe, Mrs Spark's novels are a constant reminder to us of man's fall from Grace. In a world such as ours which is cradled in Original Sin, Muriel Spark finds human failing to be 'a lack of expectancy', a tendency to be shocked by each new corruption which the world affords. Spark's art is essentially a satirical one which increasingly aims to discredit the absurdities of our world and point towards those truths which are so often forgotten in man's preoccupation with trivia. Frequently destroying the illusion of reality through pointed interventions, the disruption of normal chronology, deliberate incongruity and the intrusion of fantasy, Mrs Spark never pretends that her novels are true. She deals in fiction, valuable untruth, which attempts to display in its skill which, whilst presuming to imitate the creation of God, aims to reveal something of His purpose and design, because for Muriel Spark 'the world itself is a land of fiction, a divine fiction which is the supreme fiction because absolutely if strangely true'.

Although it was published nearly fifty years ago *The Abbess of Crewe* has a special resonance for us today. Richard Nixon's narrow escape from impeachment was only achieved by his resignation from office and, unlike the conspirators in the novel, his White House staff aides were imprisoned for their part in his plot to cheat his way to a second term as President. Only Henry Kissinger (Sister Gertrude) managed to escape the fallout by being resolutely absent from Washington and the conspiracy and, like Sister Felicity, Senator McGovern (the Democratic nominee) saw his prospects of victory dwindle. One could not have invented a more outrageous fiction but, in reality, the miscreants were punished and, if we are going to take the analogy to its logical conclusion, if the fiction were to follow life, the newly elected Abbess of Crewe who is so assured of her success, will get her come-uppance at the 'Congregational Committee of Investigation into the case of Sister Felicity's little thimble and

thimble-related matters' to which she has been summoned in Rome. Taught by history we can feel reasonably assured that the narrative voice, were the novel to go on, would be disappointed by the ultimate failure of its protégé. The satire would thus be complete.

But what of today? Instead of Sister Alexandra's electronic surveillance we live in an age of social media and "fake" news, a concept exploited by another incumbent of the Oval Office, an advocate of 'alternative facts', who has recently survived impeachment for "high crimes and misdemeanors" involving the attempt to rig an election. The descriptions of Sister Alexandra (with the exception of her intelligence and erudition) seem to fit so neatly with the current holder of the Presidency. In the case of Donald Trump, however, there seem to be no such concepts as morality, ethics, justice or truth at play in our real world to oppose his campaign of style over substance, nor any prospect of them. Instead solipsism sanctioned by populism seems to be the order of the day and Muriel Spark's belief that fiction ought to be stranger than truth has been stood on its head. Surely, no writer could have invented our real-life scenario and got away with it. Who would believe that a former TV host would consider himself greater than George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or would recommend the ingestion of bleach to combat a world pandemic? We are left with a world that allows for no possibility for comment and which leaves us with no hope of positive resolution. In a world such as this, where truth is stranger than fiction, a strategy such as Muriel Spark's can no longer work: once truth becomes lies and fact becomes invention one has to ask, "Is fiction dead"?

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