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Ghost-Writing: The Work of Muriel Spark

Gerard Carruthers

Two anecdotes. Firstly, when completing an MPhil dissertation on Muriel Spark (1918-2006) in the late 1980s, I happened to be in my parents' house one day with several of Spark's books which I had on the dining table. Later that afternoon I overheard a friend of my father's (similar stamp to pater: left-wing trade unionist) ask why was 'the boy reading wummin's books'? Some years later I was reading about James Boswell and his talent for mimicry and in the same period I also read reference in the Yale Boswell papers to Bozzy complaining that he was growing bumps on his head. This made me think: was the character of Dougal Douglas in Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) based to some extent on Boswell? Douglas is also a mimic, tells people that he has little cysts on his head from where his demonic horns have been sawn off, he is a 'ghost writer' of biographies and, most generally, a 'Jock on the Make' in London. The clincher came for me when someone told me of Spark's definite interest in Boswell. This same person, however, knew Muriel Spark and told her of my hypothesis, to which her response apparently was, 'Carruthers has it all wrong, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* has nothing at all to do with Boswell!'

Muriel Spark the wummin-writer is an idea that derives, obviously enough, from the fame of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), the book that made her own name, to say nothing of making a household name of her eponymous character. The success of *Jean Brodie* alone, however, should not really have eclipsed in Scotland the power of her entire oeuvre, the product of the most stylish and internationally successful Scottish writer since Robert Louis Stevenson. Something deeper has gone on in her native country where for several (not very good reasons) her face never entirely fitted during her life-time. There is a clue in Robin Jenkins's gruff claim of the late 1990s that Muriel Spark was not a Scottish writer and no-one could convince him otherwise.¹ We have that captured canonical moment of twentieth-century Scottish literature, the painting, *Poets' Pub* (1980) by Sandy Moffat of Milne's Bar in Edinburgh with Hugh MacDiarmid holding court, centre-stage even in the time of Edwin Morgan, the latter a rather detached figure in the portrait not quite allowed entry to the inner sanctum. Boozy, male Scottish literature in situ in the twentieth century, demanding – generally – 'condition of Scotland' writing was never going to be amenable to Muriel Spark, a woman 'of no fixed identity' (to co-opt a recurrent trope from her own fiction): born in Edinburgh, but spending her brief married life (from the age of 19) in South Africa, followed by a period, from 1944, working in British Intelligence in the south of England, thereafter pursuing a career in journalism and writing in London, New York and Tuscany. Part-Jewish in heritage, Spark converted to Roman Catholicism and became a serious writer of religious fiction, writing as often or even more so with a setting of London, Italy, France, Switzerland, Palestine and the USA as against Scotland. Spark's fiction was also deeply metaphysical, even anagogical, undertaking acts of spiritual exegesis. Scottish Literature of the twentieth-century (both writers and critics), frequently macho, realistic, often structurally nationalist even when not explicitly politically so, was far from entirely accommodating to such a cosmopolitan, internationally successful writer as Spark. To some extent she has suffered the same non-canonized Scottish fate as James Thomson, James Boswell or Thomas Carlyle. Scotland, we should note, has a remarkable track-record in affording insufficient acknowledgement to the nation's most widely reputable writers.

For some too, Spark's 'Britishness' was all too evident when in 2003 she condemned as 'treasonous' Hugh MacDiarmid's recently unearthed poems insouciant in posture about the London Blitz and critical of the British war-effort.ⁱⁱ Whether or not this charge is precisely pertinent, it is interesting to see MacDiarmid apologists make special pleadings (as they did with his saluting of Mussolini or his applauding of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956) that it is war generally that the poet was against. In 'On the Imminent Destruction of London, June 1940' MacDiarmid sees all that is rotten on Earth as centred on the British capital; but even allowing for patchy knowledge of the Death Camps in Britain at this point, such a Little Scotlander outlook as MacDiarmid's beggars belief. For a more nuanced treatment of human degradation amidst World War II, a reader might turn instead to Spark's novel, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), or, indeed, for something more thoughtfully chilling and also disturbingly gnomic in the same historical setting, Spark's short story, 'The House of the Famous Poet' (1966).

Muriel Spark is, indeed, a writer of women's books in one sense where her charting of the experience of the female protagonist in her fiction represents a profound fictional essaying of the woman in society and the world. Not a feminist in any conventional sense, Spark is nonetheless alive to the chauvinistic treatment of the 'second sex'.ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, Jean Brodie's situation in the inter-war period is detailed with much precision according to the disadvantages of her gender. She is a woman with a career both vibrantly energetic and at the same time fragile: only enabled in both her rather flamboyant behaviour and in her teaching position by the collapse of male authority (and even the shortage of suitably qualified men) following World War I. We ought to realise that some of the currents of the 1960s were visible in the 1930s - vegetarianism, Feminism, growing European interaction, free love even (or Berlin hippies for that matter), were all visible in that decade before Hitler and the united Home Front in response to the war against the Nazis shut these off. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Brodie is one of a 'legion' of her kind of women in Edinburgh, leaning over the 'democratic' counters of greengrocers, interrogating the contents of food items and of scripture, taking caravan-holidays, playing guitar and practising DIY. Some of these women even advocate the contraception revolution initiated in part by Marie Stopes, especially for the working classes. If we are alive to these social, historical currents, described breezily by Spark's typical bracing wit, we ought to see Jean Brodie as not just a mildly eccentric individual but as a woman liberated, buffeted and ultimately shut down by the currents of her time (dismissed from her job in the end for supposedly espousing Fascism).

We might also notice in relation to the Brodie-esque type of woman of the 1930s that Spark essays, the author's own countermanding identity. As outlined in her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), Spark detested Stopes, partly because she believed that Stopes had been responsible for having her dismissed from a role in her own early career. One might suspect also that strong, swirling rumours of Stopes' anti-Semitism even after the Holocaust became public knowledge, and what Spark likely saw as her kinkiness (in producing prototype sex manuals) also contributed to Spark's view of Stopes as a self-centred individual on the side, as Spark would have seen it, of death. Stopes with her part in the contraceptive revolution, both explicit but understated at the beginning of Chapter 3 of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, are easy to miss in their thematic significance. Spark's novel is, in a very wide sense, 'pro-life' as it berates and brings down its central protagonist for her attempt at controlling the lives of her girls and others. Brodie, like Spark herself with delicious irony, is a fictionalizer writing the life of her former lover, Hugh Carruthers, who has died in the Great War; and to such an extent that Hugh might never have existed. Is he merely a convenient, contemporary

fantasy of a somewhat pathetic 'school-ma'rm' justifying her spinsterhood (which in turn allows her a career as a teacher), conjugated, as Hugh is by Brodie, in his purported abilities as a singer and as a painter from her current lovers, the music and art masters at her school, the Marcia Blaine School for Girls? Seen in this light, we might observe the sad, hollow centre of Brodie's existence where, much like Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, she is a ghost-writer. We see this ghost-writing too in Brodie's desire to mould the lives of her chosen set. This, however, is never successful, her star pupil, Sandy Stranger interfering with her mentor's designs by taking Teddy Lloyd the art master as her own lover and so thwarting both Brodie's plan to place another of her girls in his bed as well as hijacking - while replicating - part of Brodie's own life experience. Sandy, also iterating all the trendy ideas of her day, thinks at one point that Jean Brodie is an 'unconscious Lesbian', a psychological diagnosis that critics follow at their peril.

The over-reading of sexuality, both in Spark's oeuvre and in Spark herself (a predominant critical failing in the twenty-first century, I would argue), runs the danger of blinding critics and readers to the fact that in Spark sex is small potatoes. If we humans are moved by sexual longing at all this is only part of a deeper and spiritual yearning, in Spark's signature outlook. In one sense quite a Freudian writer, where she is precisely attuned to the stories we tell about ourselves and others, Spark in another way is deeply resistant to the ultimately materialist nature of Freudian thought. Whether framed in the context of her Catholicism or not (and it might also be seen amid a stubborn post-Romantic outlook in the author or even as part of her deconstructionist, existentialist mentality), Spark's critique of materialism has it that our crass, selfish, greed in pursuit of mere bodily comforts and pleasures has denuded modern western society of higher moral and aesthetic sensibilities. We should not treat the lives of others as inferior or to be appropriated by our own selfish needs, either individually or as a society (where, for instance, the advocacy of contraception for the working classes in the 1930s Edinburgh grocer's shop comes perilously close to a Eugenics programme). The 'only problem' as Spark knows with her near obsession with *The Book of Job* is that of human suffering. And that problem is made, in one sense obviously enough, by other human beings. Most essentially, the mortal sin of humanity is to interfere (or attempt to interfere) with the innocent free will of our fellow human beings (and this might be seen as nefarious at least, even without Spark's own theological frame of reference that impeding human free will is wicked because this free will is God-given and is a reflection of His own centre of being). We see a very nice example of this in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* where Joyce Emily Hammond runs away from Marcia Blaine's to join her brother fighting in the Spanish Civil War and is killed en route when her train is bombed. Often this episode is assembled as Exhibit A in the case for the prosecution that Brodie is controlling architect of evil. Not so. If we read more carefully than to come to this conclusion, we notice that Joyce Emily has run away from a series of other schools prior to pitching up in Brodie's care. In other words at worst (and certainly with some level of culpability), Brodie has 'merely' encouraged pre-existing behaviour, rather than creating that behaviour, and Joyce Emily's unfortunate end is the result of her recidivism. In theological (and perhaps in quite neutral moral terms), Joyce Emily has eroded her goodness and her gambling chances by repeatedly learning nothing, or in other words allowing unfettered reign to her selfish free will. In other words, she is author of her own destiny and while not exactly helpful, Brodie is not to blame. Ironically, sympathetically even, Brodie cannot master the free will of others (or mould their destinies and identities); she is not, as Sandy at one point mistakenly thinks, 'the God of Calvin', as this God of predestination does not exist.

The stories that we tell of others, of ourselves and within and about books (encompassing a delicious set of ironies sitting at the heart of Spark's fictional and formal terrain) are never the full story. They are mere 'ghost writings' with the truth lying always elsewhere, beyond the perceiving self in some sense. Does it matter that James Boswell might or might not, unconsciously or even coincidentally, be part of the fictive DNA of Dougal Douglas? Ultimately, only (if at all), as a minor critical/textual footnote. In Spark's oeuvre, which in this sense operates almost in toto as an extended dark metaphor, it is the free willed reality of humanity that counts. With consummate formal artistry, exquisitely controlled linguistic tone and drawn to the deepest problems of being, Spark stands head and shoulders above any other Scottish writer of the twentieth-century.

Gerard Carruthers is Francis Hutcheson Professor of Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is also co-organiser of the Muriel Spark Centenary Symposium at Glasgow in association with the National Library of Scotland which will run 1st-2nd February 2018 with a special showing of the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* at the Kelvin Hall on the evening of 31st January 2018.

ⁱ See Inga Agustdottir, 'A Truthful Scot' in *In Scotland* (1999), pp.12-22.

ⁱⁱ See *The Times*, 13th April 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Attempted treatments of Spark, even from a rather soft or understated Feminist perspective have been less than trenchant and convincing because in Spark's outlook there are much bigger structural degradations in human life; see for instance, Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark* (London, 1992).