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CALVINISM, CATHOLICISM, AND FASCISM IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE*

Richard Rankin Russell

Crawford Gribben, writing about the Early Modern period in Scottish literature, contended in 2006:

When opposition to Calvinism is itself identified as part of the criteria of Scottish essentialism, those writers concerned to articulate their voice within religious parameters discover that there is no room for them at the canonical inn. But, at the very least, there ought to be room for them in the writing of Scottish literary history.¹

Indeed there should—and not just in the Early Modern period—and I have argued this point myself in relationship to the largely positive incorporation of Calvinist elements in the novel *Greenvoe* (1972) by George Mackay Brown, reared Presbyterian but later a Catholic convert.²

Muriel Spark, described by Gardiner and Maley as “arguably the most important Scottish novelist since Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson,”³ was, as it were, born into this conversation. Her mother’s family was Jewish, her father Presbyterian, and, in 1954, she converted to Roman Catholicism. Sandy Stranger, the main character of Spark’s best-known novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), informs the headmistress at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls that Brodie is a fascist and Brodie gets fired on those grounds (134). Yet we are almost

¹ Crawford Gribben, “The Literary Cultures of the Scottish Reformation,” *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 228 (2006): 65-82.

² See Richard Rankin Russell, “Recovering the Reformation Heritage in George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe*,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 42.1 (2016): 81-97.

³ Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley, “Introduction,” *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. Gardiner and Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 1.

immediately told that, after Sandy becomes Catholic in that fateful year of 1939,

By now she had entered the Catholic Church, in whose ranks she had found quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie.⁴

What are we to make of this equation of Catholicism and fascism by Sandy? And further, if Brodie is Scots Calvinist, doesn't her desire to have her girls pursue the good, beautiful, and true, recuperate, in significant ways, Calvinist contributions to the arts and go against the reductive argument that Scottish Calvinists promulgate an anti-aesthetic philosophy?

Raising such questions suggests the importance of both Calvinism and Catholicism to the novel—and how richly complex these faiths are as represented by Spark in this slim book. The amount of scholarship on Spark, who wrote 22 novels, several short story collections, two dramas, children's books, poetry, and a memoir, is unsurprisingly vast. The general pattern of the criticism on the religious question runs thus: early appreciations of the role of religion in Spark's fiction, such as Ruth Whittaker's still-helpful *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1982), but with a relative neglect of Calvinist influence;⁵ a middle phase marked by self-consciously post-modern theoretical readings, largely negative or blind towards Spark's religion;⁶ and then a current phase with a more nuanced appreciation of the role of religion in her fiction.⁷

⁴ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (San Francisco: HarperPerennial, 2009), 134; in-text citations below from this edition.

⁵ Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982). Primarily concerned with Spark as Catholic novelist, but finding Spark's attitude to her characters "uncharitable and somewhat incongruous in a novelist who is a Christian," Whittaker seems to imply a Calvinist influence: "For all their liveliness and verve, her people are denied the freedom of a human individuality, since we are made constantly aware that their choices and actions function merely as components in both a novelistic and a divine plot" (41).

⁶ For representative examples, see Martin McQuillan, ed., *Theorizing Muriel Spark* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). McQuillan includes two 1960s reviews by Hélène Cixous, skeptical of Spark's Catholicism, but taking it seriously: unlike Golding, Waugh, or Greene, "Spark underscores the irreparable duplicity of the universe, where ordinary things coexist with supernatural ones in hideous harmony" (205).

⁷ See, e.g., Gerard Carruthers, "Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist," in Gardiner and Maley, *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, 74-84, who in commenting on the McQuillan volume pertinently asks:

Is Spark's confessed spirituality now to be disregarded by critics as either irrelevant in her work or, at best, seen as a quaint delusion

A major part of this neglect of Calvinism in earlier studies of Spark stems from their neglect until the 1970s of James Hogg's 1824 novel, *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, despite the interest raised in general literary circles by its republication with an introduction by André Gide, in 1947, during a formative period in Spark's development. Before Alan Bold's 1984 essay collection, Gerard Carruthers has commented, "excellent studies (all highly aware of Spark's various literary lineages)," by Kemp, Whittaker, and even Massie were "essentially oblivious to the importance of Hogg" for Spark.⁸

The most important readings of both Calvinism and Catholicism in the last twenty years of Spark criticism come from Carruthers himself, who argues that "critics have been slow to notice a highly 'supernatural' texture" in the novel." For Carruthers, Jean Brodie "is something of a 'Frankenstein's Monster'... as she is constructed from dead parts of the Scottish body cultural, most obviously those archetypal, competing character-elements John Knox and Mary, Queen of Scots."⁹ Expounding upon his theory of Brodie as an amalgam of the Calvinist and Catholic inheritances of mid- twentieth century Scotland, Carruthers convincingly argues that the intertextual theme of demonic possession in the novel, drawn from Mark 5:9—"My name is Legion: for we are many"—illuminates not only Brodie's compellingly mixed character but also Sandy's heterogeneous character. Brodie is cast in this demonic context at the beginning of chapter three when the narrator describes a particular group of post-war women in the 1930s:

There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas

which brings some thematic structure to her work even though the "real" or "most important" themes of race, sexuality, and so on, lie elsewhere in her fiction? (75).

⁸ Gerard Carruthers, "'Fully to Savour Her Position': Muriel Spark and Scottish Identity," in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 21-38 (93-94); Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1984); Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark [Novelists and Their World]* (London: Elek, 1974); Whittaker, as in n. 5 above; Allan Massie, "Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark," in Bold, 94-107.

⁹ Gerard Carruthers, "'Creation Festers in Me': Calvinism and Cosmopolitanism in Jenkins, Spark, and Gray," in *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, eds. Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie, and Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 174-5.

and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion (43).

Several times in the novel, Sandy's eyes are described as "pig-like" (10, and *passim*), implicitly likening her to one of the swine into which Christ cast the demonic spirit from the Gadarene man, after which the entire herd ran over the cliff and perished.¹⁰ Yet porcine Sandy lives on, long past Miss Brodie, whom she has betrayed, and she is arguably "possessed"—twice. In reference to Sandy's becoming the lover of Teddy Lloyd, the girls' art teacher, a shocked Miss Brodie asks Sandy "Whatever *possessed* you?" (131; my emphasis). And regarding Sandy becoming a Catholic nun after her "extraction" of Teddy Lloyd's Catholic faith, Sandy seems similarly possessed, taken out of herself by Catholicism and rendered strange and other.

Sandy passes through a period of fascination with Calvinism that Carruthers argues enables her to judge accurately Miss Brodie's true character. When Sandy stands outside St. Giles Cathedral (where John Knox was minister) or the Tolbooth in Edinburgh (site of the old prison and executions), she

contemplate[s] these emblems of a dark and terrible salvation which made the fires of the damned seem very merry to the imagination by contrast, and much preferable.

In such moments, Sandy ponders,

however undesirable it might be, she felt deprived of it; however undesirable, she desired to know what it was, and to cease to be protected from it by enlightened people (115).

Sandy's belief that, in Calvinism, "God had planned for practically everybody before they were born a nasty surprise when they died" (115) leads her to be fascinated with these "exciting propositions." She "smelt them in the excesses of Miss Brodie in her prime," and she experiences "stabs of new and exciting Calvinistic guilt":

she began to sense what went to the makings of Miss Brodie who had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more exotic suicidal enchantment than if she had simply taken to drink like other spinsters who couldn't stand it any more (116).

In this reading, rather than inhibiting personal growth, Calvinism enables Sandy's imaginative and critical faculties. Carruthers argues that the otherness of Scottish Calvinism, combined with its emphasis on

¹⁰ Carruthers, "'Creation Festers in Me,'" 175.

predestination and election, “helps Sandy to understand the controlling actions of Jean Brodie.”¹¹

It surely does, but I do not, however, agree with Carruthers that “Brodie is the ‘emblem’ of Calvinism that Sandy eventually rejects by reporting her apparent fascist leanings to the head teacher.”¹² Brodie, raised in the Church of Scotland, is seemingly a non-denominational Protestant (she has a rota of Protestant church services she attends, though she does not attend Catholic mass). Rather, Brodie has Calvinism retrospectively “read” onto her by students such as Sandy. Miss Brodie’s elitism and desire to foster an elite or elect group—the “Brodie set”—is less theological than psychological and political; it is not Brodie’s religious affiliation that is pro-fascist, but Brodie herself, admiring both Mussolini and Hitler as those dictators rise to power in the 1930s.

Indeed, there is some evidence of Miss Jean Brodie expressing strong anti-Calvinist opinions. For instance, early in the novel, during a walk through central Edinburgh, Miss Brodie tells her girls,

John Knox ... was an embittered man. He could never be at ease with the gay French Queen. We of Edinburgh owe a lot to the French. We are Europeans” (33).

When her students Sandy and Jenny concoct a pretend letter in Brodie’s voice to Gordon Lowther, the music teacher with whom Brodie spends weekends at Cramond, they make her wary of Presbyterian moral judgments:

your housekeeper fills me with anxiety like John Knox. I fear she is rather narrow, which arises from an ignorance of culture and the Italian scene (77).

Later in the novel, after that housekeeper leaves Mr. Lowther’s employment, Brodie tells her students that his new, temporary housekeepers are “too much in with Miss Gaunt and the Church of Scotland” (86). Intellectually, too, she is moving beyond her background, and her faith is in flux: early on, we are alerted that Miss Brodie,

at the same time as adhering to the strict Church of Scotland habits of her youth, and keeping the Sabbath, was now, in her prime, attending evening classes in comparative religion at the University (36).

How does this reading of Brodie’s religion square with her anti-Catholic comments to her girls? At one point, Brodie asserts that the

¹¹ Carruthers, “Creation Festers in Me,” 176.

¹² Carruthers, “Creation Festers in Me,” 176.

Catholic Church “was a church of superstition, and that only people who did not want to think for themselves were Roman Catholics,” and most critics writing about her religious views stop there. However the passage continues, with the narrator suggesting a more nuanced insight into her real affinities with Catholicism:

In some ways, her attitude was a strange one, because she was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church; possibly it could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, it might even have normalized her. But perhaps this was the reason that she shunned it, lover of Italy though she was, bringing to her support a rigid Edinburgh-born side of herself when the Catholic Church was in question (90).

The picture of Brodie as a fundamentalist Scottish Protestant, even a Calvinist, is complicated by and conflated with repeated descriptions of her “dark Roman profile” (6) and her admiration of the emergent Italian fascist Mussolini. Miss Brodie even brings back a picture from Rome of Mussolini’s marching blackshirts, prompting Sandy to think 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” (31). Even her personal life, in her affair with the music and attraction to the art master, is perhaps to be better read as a loosening of her religious affiliation, than as Calvinist antinomianism. Brodie thus is a mixed character in that she often seems to hold her Presbyterian background at arm’s length and has become increasingly attracted to things Italian, including Catholicism and fascism; her beliefs, as well as her character are thoroughly in flux, which crucially informs her fascism.

Famously, Sandy reflects about Brodie, “She thinks she is Providence ... she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end” (129). I agree with Carruthers that “Calvinism provides Sandy with a moral template against which to judge her teacher and to realize how grave her behavior is” through allowing “Calvinism, supposedly so hostile to the imagination,” to illuminate Sandy’s own imaginative insight.¹³ And surely, Miss Brodie’s emphasis on her students’ pursuing the “good, the true, and the beautiful” further belies this myth (if she is read as Calvinist, which, as I’ve tried to show, isn’t clear from the novel) that Calvinism was hostile to the imagination.

Fascinatingly, Sandy converts to Catholicism out of her affair with Teddy Lloyd, who remains preoccupied with Brodie: “The more she

¹³ Carruthers, *ibid.*, 176-7.

discovered him to be still in love with Jean Brodie, the more she was curious about the mind that loved the woman.” Within months, her absorption in his mind led her to extract

his religion as a pith from a husk. Her mind was as full of his religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible. She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time (132).

Sandy also, we might argue, drawing on Carruthers’s claim about the novel’s privileging of demonic possession, has become *possessed* by Brodie and even embodies her in particular ways; she has the last words of the novel and, as Sister Helena, tells a visitor that the main influence of her school days “was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime” (137). Viewed this way, the novel seems more psychological than theological, more a study of authoritarianism, or, as Allan Massie has argued, a study of solipsism, than of either Calvinism or Catholicism *per se*.¹⁴

In this reading, we realize that not only Brodie was an authoritarian, even a literal fascist, but also, that the novel tantalizingly implies that Sandy, now Sister Helena, and by extension, the Catholic Church, accommodated fascism. Sandy converted to Catholicism in 1939, the year Pius XII became Pope. At the time Spark was writing the novel, accusations of this pope’s supposed silence about Hitler’s Final Solution were widespread.¹⁵ The Brodie student, Joyce Emily, who runs away to

¹⁴ For Brodie’s continuing influence on Sandy in this regard, see Joseph Hynes, *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark’s Novels* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988): “in becoming Catholic, Sandy is not rejecting her teacher but following the path which the narrator had seen as desirable if implausible for Jean. Thus when Sandy is converted (‘transfigured’) from her Knoxian furor and absolutism to Catholicism, she is extending Jean Brodie’s career and influence and showing the effectiveness of Jean’s example ... so that Sister Helen is anything but sentimental in remarking that ‘a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime’ ... was the greatest influence upon her, whether one thinks of an influence as an example to follow or to resist” (77). Allan Massie, “Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark,” argues in theological terms that “The heresy with which Muriel Spark peculiarly concerns herself is solipsism,” and holds specifically about Miss Brodie, “She is willfully and blindly ignorant of the significance of her actions; self-absorbed, she has no conception of others. She has never come to terms with what she boasts of having rejected, for she lives only in her own mind” (100, 102).

¹⁵ For a recent rebuttal, see Mark Riebling’s *Church of Spies: The Pope’s Secret War against Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), which documents three different collaborations by Pius XII with the German resistance to bring down the Nazi regime.

Spain to find her brother, who is fighting for the Republican left, goes looking for him among Franco's Catholic-backed Fascist right (126-7, 133).

Carruthers sees Spark as privileging what he terms "the endless story" of Catholicism, "wherein the battle between good and evil is never done and is never entirely predictable," over what he believes is the "crude predetermined drama" of Calvinism.¹⁶ But Spark's portrayal is less one-sided than that. Sandy's desperate and fitful grasping of the bars of her cell in the convent after she has become Sister Helena (33, 35, 137) suggests that she has imprisoned herself in a system of Catholic thought from which she is desperate to escape; she also longs to escape from the peering eyes of visitors who come to see her after the publication of her treatise, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, a work that suggests her belief in how ordinary people can become chosen by forces beyond their ken and become extraordinary, if possessed leaders—like Miss Brodie and herself.

Hovering fitfully and faintly in the background here is the lacuna in criticism of the novel that neglects its oblique consideration of anti-Semitism—in Brodie as an admirer of Hitler, or perhaps also in Sandy. Owen Dudley Edwards has written of the regular attendance by Spark's parents at synagogue and major holy days, pointing out also that in the 1930s Spark's school, Gillespie's, "seems to have been an unusual school in its anti-Fascism," and that the "proto-Brodie teacher" there seemed "pro-Fascist" to Spark and her school friend Frances Niven.¹⁷ Edwards argues that "We should ... read Jean Brodie with a sense of urgency of the growing threat to Jews," and that "the insidious charm of Jean Brodie herself, her exoticism, her manipulation, her charisma, her hold on youth convey the magic to which so much of European youth fell prey."¹⁸ As William Baker cautions, Spark disliked being categorized as a Jewish novelist.¹⁹ but any novelist writing in 1961 about the 1930s must have anticipated readers seeing Brodie as wilfully blind to the Holocaust that Spark's readers knew must soon come. Spark's family background, her marriage, and her Communist connections surely informed her attitude to fascism and anti-Semitism, and her aversion to them emerges in her portrait of Brodie,

¹⁶ Carruthers, "Fully to Savour Her Position," 103.

¹⁷ Owen Dudley Edwards, "God and the Little Poets: On David Daiches and Muriel Spark," in *David Daiches: A Celebration of His Life and Work*, ed. William Baker and Michael Lister (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 46, 51.

¹⁸ Edwards, 51.

¹⁹ William Baker, "Preface," in *Jewish Writing ... in the U.K.*, ed. Baker and Shumaker, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2019), II: x.

raised Calvinist, in many ways anti-authoritarian by tradition, yet drawn despite her protests otherwise to the strand of authoritarianism in the Catholic Church.

Indeed, the novel links fascism and flux in Miss Brodie's "mixed character" just as new accounts of Mussolini show that dictator evinced a desire to always have a personality in flux.²⁰ Carruthers argues that Spark privileges flux as a desideratum for her characters and, by extension, for human beings:

The logic of Spark's premise is that we should delight to some extent in the flux of life, with its possibilities of grace, and cling to no solid ideas about the people and places with whom we come in contact: this is the ultimate belief in predestination that the world, under God's grace, will prove time and again to be wrong.²¹

But Spark herself spoke of her firm belief in Catholicism as fixed, in the process denigrating fluctuation in belief: "The Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart. It's not a fluctuating thing."²² In this light, though Miss Brodie's character flaws should not be attributed to a caricatured Calvinism, neither should her personality be read as subconsciously or embryonically Catholic.

In arguing for the need to reexamine Spark's treatment of Calvinism in the novel, and to set aside the casual anti-Calvinist stereotypes that, as Professor Gribben has correctly argued, have often distorted Scottish literary criticism, I am also suggesting the validity of a criticism that is both theologically-informed and religiously-grounded. As I noted earlier, Professor Carruthers has been one of the few Spark critics to recognize the significance for this novel, and for Spark, of both theological traditions. Those with different religious commitments will read literary works in different ways, and see different things in them, but to disregard or shortchange the complexity of religion in this novel, as in Scottish literature more generally, is bad criticism and bad literary history.

Miss Jean Brodie's Edinburgh inheritance drew less from John Knox or even Mary, Queen of Scots, than from a different iconic Scot, her

²⁰ See Richard Washburn Child, "Notable and Quotable: On Mussolini," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 28, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/notable-quotable-on-mussolini-1456694913>: "Mussolini, first of all, and above all and after all, is a personality always in a state of flux, adjusting its leadership to a world eternally in a state of flux." The passage is from the foreword by Child in his translation of Mussolini's *My Autobiography* (1928).

²¹ Carruthers, "'Creation Festers in Me,'" 179:

²² Spark, "My Conversion," *Twentieth Century*, 170, no. 1011 (Autumn 1961), 60.

namesake William Brodie, cabinetmaker by day and burglar by night, whose title of Deacon came not from a role in the kirk but from his status in the trades and city government. Masquerading as a respectable teacher by day, working slyly as a thief by afternoon and evening, the fascist Jean Brodie steals her students' lives, predicting and trying to control their life trajectory, an anticipation of the much greater "theft"—the slaughter of six million Jewish lives by the Nazi regime during World War II. Her prime is no triumph, but a sorry record of stolen lives into which she inserts her own personal drama. As Dorothea Walker put it, "Her greatest wish is really to reproduce clones of herself."²³ Such actions have nothing whatsoever to do with Reformed theology properly understood, which privileges God's lavish gift of grace toward fallen sinners, not His wrath and control of our lives. Brodie is finally a thief of the Gospel, selfishly undermining the *agape*, sacrificial love as practiced by Calvinists, Catholics, and all believing Christians.

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²³ Dorothea Walker, *Muriel Spark* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 41.