

The Structure of Reminiscence: The narrative strategies in Muriel Spark's *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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Is there a link between Muriel Spark the biographer and Muriel Spark the novelist? It is frequently forgotten that Spark wrote many literary biographies before she became a novelist. In this essay I propose to examine her most successful biographical work, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1951), and to ask how the methods and ideas she applies to this text are developed in her novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). One may think that, since *Child of Light* is a work of non-fiction, it is impossible to make a straightforward comparison with Spark's novels; in fact, she herself has been keen to make distinctions between novels and biographies. My intention here, however, is that her biographical works illustrate the process by which her creative talent evolved. On the one hand, her documentary account of Mary Shelley's life may provide us, more directly than any of her novels, a glimpse into Spark's view of life; on the other hand, she must have put into it, even if unconsciously, some of her potential talent as a future novelist, for she is a creative writer in the most essential sense of the phrase.

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According to her own autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1993), Spark was going through an important phase in her literary career in 1950, when she was writing *Child of Light*. She was then "moving (...) from lyric poetry to narrative verse," which she recognized in retrospect as "the start of my move towards the short story and the novel"(197). We may now say, therefore, that this biography was written when Spark's talent as a novelist was just flowering. In her preface to the revised edition of *Child of Light*, renamed *Mary Shelley* (1987),

Spark comments on the original edition⁽¹⁾:

I recall when I first wrote the book that I was very careful not to make it novelistic. I have always disliked the sort of biography which states "X lay on the bed and watched the candles flickering on the roof beams," when there is no evidence that X did so. (xii)

This is intriguing, because *Child of Light* is indeed novelistic, though in the sense of her own fiction. It shows two prominent characteristics: the intrusiveness of the narrative voice and the complexity of the chronology that we find in her fictional narrative. Both these characteristics are illustrated in the opening:

We are hardly impressed with a sense of love and light when we look back now on that period of transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth century — the period of revolution and reaction which gave effect to the fame of Mary Shelley's parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (...) In retrospect, Godwin for example seems arrested always in a sepia monochrome of thought, while Mary Wollstonecraft flounders wildly through a grey drizzle that never lifts.

To visualize Mary Shelley's parents in the actual setting they occupied, we must suspend subsequent history, and find them, as they were, celebrated figures in the cause of enlightenment, conscious of no gloom but that of the ignorance surrounding them, and confirmed in the belief that they bore a light to emblazon history (...) (9–10)

Spark is here juxtaposing two different viewpoints

through which to view her subject. On the one hand, she presents, through her own mid-twentieth century perspective, the remote figures of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, as faded and unpalpable as in an old “monochrome”; on the other hand, she depicts them, as if through the eyes of their enchanted contemporaries, as the intellectual heroes of their time. This contrast emphasizes the temporal distance that separates the narrator from the narrated subject.

In order to understand fully the effects of this method, it is probably useful to invoke the narratological theories of Gérard Genette. He bases his theories on an analysis of Proust, from whom, according to Alan Bold, “Spark learned how to take liberties with time” in her fiction (27). Genette distinguishes between the “time of the story” and “the (pseudo-) time of the narrative,” and studies the relations between the two (37). It is precisely this distinction that Spark makes in her preliminary remark to the book, by stressing the “temporal duality” of her narrative (Genette 33). Presumably, Spark was already so fascinated by the Proustian method when writing this biography that she felt the need to experiment with it.

Genette explores the “connections between the temporal order of succession of events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative,” and this method of analysis is directly applicable to Spark (35). As the story of Mary Shelley’s life progresses, it becomes clear that Spark is purposely complicating the relation between the two temporal orders defined by Genette. To see how this works, let us first look at the opening passage of Chapter 2:

When in the later years Mary Shelley looked back on her childhood, the time she recalled with the fondest clarity was not her early home life, but the period she spent away from her family. In her introduction to a revised edition of *Frankenstein* she reminisced:

I lived principally in the country as a girl and passed a considerable time in Scotland. I made occasional visits to the more picturesque parts; but my habitual residence was on the blank and

dreary northern shores of Tay, near Dundee. Blank and Dreary I call them in retrospect; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom... (16)

Mary’s retrospective comment quoted here constitutes what Genette calls a *prolepsis*, a “narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (49). While the use of prolepsis is not uncommon in biographical or autobiographical narrative, Spark uses, almost exclusively, a certain type of prolepsis. It is a prolepsis which is at the same time an *analepsis* (“any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment”) – or, to put it more simply, it is an anticipation of a retrospection, as is Mary’s comment above (Genette 40).

Another paragraph found later in the same chapter shows a more complex temporal structure:

Mary throve in her new freedom (...) “It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house” she wrote in her introduction to *Frankenstein*, “or in the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered.” (...) “[A]iry flights” she called these fantasies in after years, but she was mistakenly identifying herself, then, with Shelley; for Mary’s imagination, animated by those months among the Perthshire hills, was in no way ethereal. (20)

In this passage, the same incident is seen from three different points in time, or “temporal positions”(Genette 42). Spark first tells us about the fifteen-year-old Mary enjoying her freedom in Scotland; then quotes the words of the eighteen-year-old Mary reminiscing about herself at the time; and finally superimposes on these her own viewpoint, looking back at the whole of Mary’s life from the time of her narrative. This is another anticipatory retrospection, but this time it is contained within the omniscient viewpoint of Spark the narrator,

who is in control of the complex temporal relations. Her perspective here demonstrates what is comparable to the "temporal omnipresence" which Genette says is characteristic of Proustian narrative (41).

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The use of analeptic prolepsis and repeating analepsis in this text in fact directly corresponds to what critics call flashback and flashforward in Spark's fiction. The latter method in particular has been much discussed in connection with the omniscience of her narrator. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* consists almost solely of flashbacks and flashforwards, and therefore there is no sense of temporal linearity in the novel. In *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971), David Lodge dedicates a whole chapter (entitled "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience") to an analysis of the "relationship between method and meaning" in the novel. He suggests that the narrator of the novel reconstructs the order of the episodes so that, on first reading, it seems "as if the author were ordering events intuitively and even haphazardly" (125).

But, instead of asking what principle underlies this seemingly disorderly structure, Lodge ultimately attributes the complex series of time-shifts in the narrative to "the author's pretensions to omniscience" which he accepts as a positive element in Spark's fiction (142). It seems that Lodge has been influenced in this respect by the account of the novel by Frank Kermode, who was probably the first critic to suggest that Spark's perspective as it is felt through the narrative voices of her novels seems to resemble God's:

Mrs Spark is even somewhat arrogant about the extent of the novelist's power: knowing the end of the story, she deliberately gives it away, and in a narrative which could have regular climactic moments she fudges them, simply because the design of her world, like God's, has more interesting aspects than mere chronological progress and the satisfaction of naive expectations in the reader. (208)

Anthony Burgess must have felt in a similar way when he described Spark as "a Catholic convert who views human life almost from the lofty height of the Church Triumphant - brilliantly detached, savagely comic" (*English Literature* 230). We may assume that Lodge more or less shares with Kermode and Burgess the inclination to identify Spark's narrator with herself, and to compare her control of her own fictional world with the unpredictability of God.

But to interpret all the anachronies in Spark's novels merely as a whimsical performance of the all-powerful author-narrator simplifies the matters too much. In Spark's rigorously economical writing there is always a rigorous unity of form, each time created according to a definite theme. What, then, is the theme that holds the narrative of *Child of Light* together? In considering this question, I would like to draw attention to an interesting passage in Chapter 6 of the text, where Spark describes Mary's life in Italy in 1819, at which time Mary still had not overcome the grief caused by the death of her son, William:

On the small roofed terrace at the top of their villa which Shelley made his study, Mary found some degree of peace, discussing Shelley's work with him, and looking out on the wide vista of country and sea. Here they heard the peasants singing at their work, and in later years she recalled the associations of this place and time with that nostalgic pathos in which even sad times past present themselves: "...in the evening the water-wheel creaked as the process of irrigation went on, and the fireflies flashed from among the myrtle hedges: Nature was bright, sunshiny, and cheerful or diversified by storms of a majestic terror, such as we had never before witnessed." (62)

As I have already pointed out, it is a favourite narrative device of Spark's to illustrate some incident in her story with some retrospective remark about that incident, made later (in this case) by Mary or someone else. Interestingly, however, Spark is here using Mary's retrospective comment above in preference to another

one which she made in 1819. This later comment, found in Mary's letter to her best friend, Mrs Gisborne, is quoted by R. Glynn Grylls in *Mary Shelley: A Biography* (1938)²¹:

Leghorn, 28th August, 1819.

My dear Marianne— We are very dull at Leghorn, and I can therefore write nothing to amuse you. We live in a little country house at the end of a green lane, surrounded by a *podore* (...) The people are always busy, and it is pleasant to see three or four of them transform in one day a bed of Indian corn to one of celery (...) They sing, not very melodiously, but very loud, Rossini's music, "*Mi rivedrai, ti rivedro,*" and they are accompanied by the cicala, a kind of little beetle, that makes a noise with its tail as loud as Johnny can sing (...) (114)

Why should Spark omit introducing this passage, and quote instead what Mary wrote more than twenty years later (Spark's quotation is from *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, a travelogue which Mary started writing in early 1840s, when she was nearly fifty-years-old)? Spark is obviously drawing attention to the importance of memory as an element of Mary's life, which is indeed confirmed by Mary's own words in a letter, commented on in Chapter 5 (italics added):

Her first novel now completed, Mary went up to London to seek a publisher, staying with the Godwins. Her father, with his money-neurosis, depressed her, and a sensation of nostalgic sadness overcame her when she attempted to while away a few hours reading *Childe Harold*: "It made me dreadfully melancholy" she wrote to Shelley, "— the lake — the mountains and the faces associated with these scenes passed before me — Why is not life a continued moment where hours and days are not counted..."(53)

This incident is trivial, but for the significant feeling expressed by Mary. Here she is not simply longing for happy times past, but is lamenting the very fact that humans are inevitably prone to such retrospection.

Spark notes another instance when a thought in this vein is expressed in Mary's writing, this time in her journal of 1821:

Journal 4th August — (...) Shelley's birthday. Seven years are now gone; What change! What a life! We now appear tranquil; yet who knows what wind — but I will not prognosticate evil, we have had enough of it. When Shelley came to Italy, I said all is well if it were permanent; it was more passing than an Italian twilight. I now say the same. May it be a polar day; yet that, too, has an end. (72)

At this point of her life Mary seems harassed by her own too-acute awareness of what Spark describes as "the transience of things," which Mary fears may bring a new series of misfortunes. Her fears were prophetic and Shelley died in 1822, after which, in Spark's words, Mary "lived half her life in retrospect"(86). Spark also points out that Mary suffered from a deep sense of guilt towards Shelley, caused by his friend Leigh Hunt, who blamed her for having treated her husband coldly before his death.

It seems that the form of Spark's narrative itself represents Mary's state of mind as such. Spark quotes, for instance, the following entry from Mary's journal, which records her shock at discovering the treachery of Jane Williams, whom she had considered as her closest friend after Shelley's death five years earlier.

Journal 13th July — My friend has proved false and treacherous! Miserable discovery... Writing, study, quiet, such remedies I must seek...(98)

About thirty pages later, we are reminded of these words, when Spark comments:

Her last novel, *Falkner*, was published the year after her father died. She wrote this book with unusual facility. "My best it will be — I believe," she stated in her diary when the book was in progress. But at other times she seemed to look upon her work, now, as a breadwinning device

only, and not as something necessary to her well-being. It was ten years since she had written in her diary, "Writing, study, quiet, such remedies I must seek..."(129)

This is an obvious case of repeating analepsis, and on a few other occasions Spark's narrative refers back to its own past in like manner. Since Spark uses relatively few quotations (considerably fewer at least than Grylls does) it is all the more striking that she should repeat the same ones twice.

Spark mentions less and less new facts about Mary's life as the story nears its end. Nothing is said of her frequent exchange of letters with Henry Trelawny and his wife Augusta, nor of her re-encounter with Coleridge (both of which are mentioned by Grylls.) And yet she does not hesitate to reproduce Mary's words in full when they express her nostalgic emotion vividly. In the final chapter of the biographical part, Spark comments on a passage from Mary's *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, which describes her trip with her son, Percy Florence, and his friends from Oxford:

And when, catching up on her young companions, she passed through Geneva, Mary located, with what a distillation of memory and wonder, the landscape of times past.

At length, I caught a glimpse of the scenes among which I had lived, when first I stepped out from childhood into life. There, on the shore of Bellerive, stood Diodati; and our humble dwelling, Maison Chapuis, nestled close to the lake below. There were the terraces, the vineyard, the upward path threading them, the little port where our boat lay moored; I could mark and recognise a thousand slight peculiarities, familiar objects then — forgotten since — now replete with recollections and associations...

Here Byron's magnificence first entered her imagination; here Shelley had conversed and boated with him; it was here, round the fireside of Byron's Villa Diodati that Frankenstein was conceived. "...all my life since was but an unreal

phantasmagoria" Mary wrote, "— the shades that gathered round the scene were realities..." (112)

A sense of drama is created by the perfect synchronization between the narrative and the narrated content, between theme and form.

We may now see that memory is in fact the central factor which determines the narrative structure in this text. As Mary in tracing her memory sees and summarizes her past, Spark's narrative, in thus looking back at the incidents it has recounted, envelopes the whole of Mary's life in its own sense of nostalgia. Spark's use of repeating analepses symbolically represents Mary's own inclination to retrospective thought which, we may naturally assume, was full of flashbacks of days past. It is interesting to contrast Spark's relationship to her subject (Mary) as such with that of Grylls, who sometimes assumes Mary's inner voice for dramatic effect. Spark sought when writing her book to be "scrupulously accurate," and though there are some facts she omits, she does not invent any (*Curriculum Vitae* 195). Instead, she imaginatively invented a form of narrative which itself represents the "landscape of times past" as Mary Shelley saw it in her own mind.

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Spark's experimental narrative methods in *Child of Light* are repeated in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. In this novel, too, memory plays an important role in the narrative structure, and is represented by the use of repetition. The events in the novel are not told in chronological order, and the temporal relations among the events are extremely complex. But, although it is probably impossible for the reader to apprehend the story in its proper temporal sequence on first reading, Spark is in fact very meticulous about its underlying chronological structure, and the time of almost every event can be located, by simple calculation, to the year or even the month when it happened.

The story is centred on Miss Jean Brodie, an enthusiastic and eccentric teacher at Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh, and her six favourite

pupils — Sandy Stranger, Rose Stanley, Jenny Gray, Eunice Gardiner, Monica Douglas, Mary Macgregor — known to the school as the Brodie set. The major part of the story is set in the 1930s, during which period Miss Brodie recognizes herself to be in her “prime” and is determined to live it to the full, while the girls move from the Junior School, where they first come into her hands, to the Senior School. In return for their loyalty to the fascinating but domineering Miss Brodie, the girls are taken into her secrets, from her ardent admiration for Mussolini’s Italy to her love affairs with the only two male teachers in the school, the art master and the singing master.

The reader is also informed of the major events which happen to Miss Brodie and the Brodie set during and after the World War II, by which time all of them have left Marcia Blaine School. Mary dies young in a hotel fire; Rose, Monica and Eunice get married; Jenny becomes an actress; Sandy becomes a nun and achieves considerable fame for writing a psychological treatise entitled “Transfiguration of the Commonplace”; and Miss Brodie — past her prime — dies of an “internal growth,” having been forced to retire early from school because one of her own girls betrayed her (56).

The importance of time in the narrative can be discerned already in the first several passages of the novel. The narrator begins the story *in medias res*, and in the opening of the novel we see the Brodie girls in their adolescence:

The boys, as they talked to the girls from Marcia Blaine School, stood on the far side of their bicycles holding the handlebars, which established a protective fence of bicycle between the sexes, and the impression that at any moment the boys were likely to be away.

The girls could not take off their panama hats because this was not far from the school gates and hatlessness was an offense. Certain departures from the proper set of the hat on the head were overlooked in the case of fourth form girls and upwards so long as nobody wore their hat at an angle. (5)

The time of this scene later turns out to be a critical point in the story time, and the beginnings of the next few paragraphs show the narrator’s effort both to imprint the initial tableau in the reader’s mind, and to establish it as a “set point” in the story time (I italicize phrases which refer to time):

These girls formed the Brodie set. That was what they had been called even before the headmistress had given them the name, in scorn, *when they had moved from the Junior to the Senior School at the age of twelve* (....) (5)

By the time they were sixteen, and had reached the fourth form, and loitered beyond the gates after school, and had adapted themselves to the orthodox regime, they remained unmistakably Brodie (...) (6)

Then, after a brief paragraph referring to the origin of Marcia Blaine School, the girls are presented, for the third time, as they were in the incipit:

The girls who loitered beneath the tree, shoulder to shoulder, very close to each other because of the boys, were all famous for something. *Now, at sixteen*, Monica Douglas was a prefect, famous mostly for mathematics which she could do in her brain (...) (6)

The immediate effect of this narrative strategy is that the reader comes to consider this point in the story time as the narrative present; anything after it would be taken as a flashforward, and anything before it a flashback. This impression is clearly shared by David Lodge, who says:

We are not, as readers, situated in the adult lives of the Brodie set, looking back with mixed emotions on their schooldays; rather, we are situated with them in their schooldays, but able to look forward occasionally, as they cannot, at what is to happen to them later. (126)

He also adds that the account of the girls’ schooldays is

“itself in large part an extended flashback” of the time in the incipit (288).

Lodge points out the importance of the perspective of Sandy Stranger, the most trusted disciple of Miss Brodie. Sandy is, as we learn fairly early, in fact the one who “betrays” Miss Brodie in the end. She helps the headmistress of the school expel her own mentor, using against her the evidence of her pseudo-fascistic political views. Lodge defines Sandy as “the eyes of the reader” and “a perceiving consciousness in the novel” (127, 128). But Lodge also maintains the view that the predominant perspective in the novel is that of a narrator, who cannot be truly identified with any of the characters. He asserts that the novel “freely exploits the convention of authorial omniscience” and that Spark “establish[es] her own authorial presence from the outset” (140, 136). Lodge obviously bases this view on the narrator’s ability to make such comments every now and then as to convince the reader that the narrator’s range of knowledge far exceeds Sandy’s.

This is most ostentatiously demonstrated when the narrator suddenly inserts flashforwards in which Sandy is absent but the other Brodie girls are seen in their adulthood and their thought or words are recounted. This seems to prove not only that the narrator is “temporally omnipresent,” but that Sandy’s perspective is, after all, subordinate to the narrator’s. On p.26, while the narrator is speaking of the winter of 1931, when the girls are aged ten, we suddenly encounter a flashforward:

Eunice Gardiner was so quiet at first, it was difficult to see why she had been drawn in by Miss Brodie. But eventually she cut capers for the relief and amusement of the tea-parties, doing cartwheels on the carpet. “You are an Ariel,” said Miss Brodie (...). It was twenty-eight years after Eunice did the splits in Miss Brodie’s flat that she, who had become a nurse and married a doctor, said to her husband one evening:

“Next year when we go to the Festival — “
“Yes?”

She was making a wool rug, pulling at a different stitch.

“Yes?” he said.

“When we go to Edinburgh,” she said, “remind me while we are there to go and visit Miss Brodie’s grave.”

“Who was Miss Brodie?”

“A teacher of mine, she was full of culture. She was an Edinburgh festival all on her own. She used to give us teas at her flat and tell us about her prime.” (26–7)

Likewise, on another occasion the narrator first tells us about Jenny at the age of twelve, and then shows her as a middle-aged woman, already “an actress of moderate reputation”:

It happened she was standing with a man she did not know very well outside a famous building in Rome, waiting for the rain to stop. She was surprised by a reawakening of that same buoyant and airy discovery of sex, a total sensation which it was impossible to say was physical or mental, only that it contained the lost and guileless delight of her eleventh year (...) There was nothing whatever to be done about it, for Jenny had been contentedly married for sixteen years past; but the concise happening filled her with astonishment whenever it came to mind in later days, and with a sense of the hidden potentialities in all things. (81)

At the end of the novel, however, we learn that these events later came to be known to Sandy through Eunice and Jenny themselves. The final scene of the novel shows Sandy, middle-aged, already living at the convent. All the Brodie girls, except Mary Macgregor who has died in a fire, visit Sandy and talk about Miss Brodie, who is now also dead:

When Jenny came to see Sandy, who now bore the name Sister Helena of Transfiguration, she told Sandy about her sudden falling in love with a man in Rome and there being nothing to be done about it. “Miss Brodie would have liked to know about it,” she said, “sinner as she was.”

Eunice, when she came, told Sandy, “We were at

the Edinburgh festival last year. I found Miss Brodie's grave, I put some flowers on it. I've told my husband all the stories about her, sitting under the elm and all that; he thinks she was marvelous fun."

"So she was, really, when you think of it."

"Yes, she was," said Eunice, "in her prime." (127)

In this manner, the reader discerns that nearly all the episodes which had initially seemed outside the range of Sandy's knowledge have been in fact incorporated into it at some point or another. This belated revelation constitutes a final twist, as it greatly alters the reader's impression of the whole novel. It staggers the reader's belief in the narrator's "authorial omniscience"—there suddenly arises, instead, the possibility that the whole story has been seen from Sandy's retrospective viewpoint. This hypothesis seems to be further supported by the fact that the end of the narrative time (the end of the novel) corresponds to the latest point in the story time, that is when Sandy is receiving her visitors at the convent (which can be calculated to be in the late 1950s.) Then all the events, even those the reader has read as flashforwards, come to be seen as extended flashbacks from that point; after all, the novel is written in the past tense throughout.

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The end of the novel thus provokes a retroactive reading of it, upon which the reader is better able to apprehend its structure and its theme. While on first reading the story has seemed to be a mere patchwork of almost miscellaneous episodes, the reader now realizes that there is only one central episode, to which all the others are subordinate, an elaborate preparation. The climactic episode is Sandy's betrayal of Miss Brodie, which occurs nearly at the very end of the novel. We may recall that the episode of Jenny in Rome, which when first recounted has seemed to have nothing to do with Miss Brodie, is finally associated with her by Jenny's remark, "Miss Brodie would have liked to know about it." In this way, every episode in the novel is somehow connected with Miss Brodie in Sandy's

consciousness, and the whole story can be understood as Sandy's mental reenactment of her betrayal.

As we have seen, at the beginning of the novel the Brodie girls are aged sixteen and already in the Senior School. The story then reverts to 1930, when the girls are aged ten and are new pupils in Miss Brodie's class. From then on, the narrative mainly follows the development of the girls and their relationship with Miss Brodie, occasionally offering the reader glimpses of their future, until it once more reaches the point from which it began, in 1936. After this, the plot moves swiftly into its climax—though the reader has been acquainted, through flashforwards, with most of what happens there.

The novel ends with an interview between Sandy at the convent and a young man, who questions her about her treatise. The picture of Sandy speaking to her visitors has been presented many times before this point, and every time she is seen to be "clutching the bars of the grill," as though she were a prisoner. Here Sandy clutches the bars "more desperately than ever." Then comes the final dialogue:

"What were the main influences of your school days, Sister Helena? Were they literary or political or personal? Was it Calvinism?"

Sandy said: "There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime." (128)

The ending leaves no doubt that Sandy is haunted by her memory of Miss Brodie. The dark and claustrophobic atmosphere of the convent, detached from the outside world, seems to symbolize Sandy's state of mind.

In Proust's *Remembrance of Times Past*, the memory of Marcel, the protagonist, is always triggered in the compressed darkness of the bedroom. There, on the verge of sleep, Marcel has free access to every part in his mind, where lies the vast landscape of his past. Genette analyses Marcel's relationship to his memory:

The importance of "anachronic" narrative in the *Recherche du temps perdu* is obviously connected to the retrospectively synthetic character of

Proustian narrative, which is totally present in the narrator's mind at every moment. Ever since the day when the narrator in a trance perceived the unifying significance of his story, he never ceases to hold all its threads simultaneously, to apprehend simultaneously all of its places and all of its moments, to be capable of establishing a multitude of "telescopic" relationships amongst them. (78)

It is possible to suppose that Sandy, in the darkness, is also subject to the spontaneous recollection of her past. Unlike Marcel, however, she is oppressed and tortured by her memory, in the centre of which lies the moment of her betrayal. When she tries to mentally relive that moment, in the hope of exorcising it perhaps, she cannot help reliving her past with Miss Brodie in its entirety, so entangled is the "network" of her memories.

Throughout the novel there are many hints suggesting that the evocation of each episode is in fact triggered by a turn in Sandy's remembering consciousness. There is much emphasis on such aspects of Sandy's character as distinguish her potential as a "recaller." When Monica Douglas causes a sensation among the Brodie set by declaring that she has witnessed Miss Brodie being kissed by Teddy Lloyd, the art master, Sandy relentlessly pumps her for details:

"What part of the art room were they standing in?"
 "The far side," Monica said. "I know he had his arm round her and was kissing her. They jumped apart when I opened the door."
 "Which arm?" Sandy snapped.
 "The right of course, he hasn't got a left."
 "Were you inside or outside the room when you saw them?" Sandy said.
 "Well, in and out. I saw them, I tell you."
 (...)
 "I don't believe what she said," said Sandy, desperately trying to visualize the scene in the art room and to goad factual Monica into describing it with due feeling. (52,3)

Sandy even orders Monica to demonstrate her behaviour at the time of the incident and, dissatisfied

with Monica's performance, takes it upon herself to reenact the scene several times. Sandy's unwearying hunger for details with which to feed her fancy is also directed towards Jenny, when the latter describes her encounter with an exhibitionist and her subsequent interview with a policewoman, which greatly stirs Sandy's imagination:

"What did she look like? Did she wear a helmet?"
 "No, a cap. She had short, dark, curly hair curling from under the cap. And a dark blue uniform. She said, 'Now tell me all about it.'"
 "And what did you say?" said Sandy for the fourth time.
 For the fourth time Jenny replied (...) (67)

This characteristic of Sandy should not be taken lightly, for it is vital when considering the greatest enigma in the novel. I have stated before that almost all the incidents in the story are revealed in the end to be known to Sandy. There is one episode, however, which appears to be utterly inaccessible to her, or to anyone other than an omniscient narrator.⁴³ That is the scene of Mary Macgregor's death, which takes place in a hotel fire when she is aged twenty-three, described as follows in a flashforward:

Back and forth along the corridors ran Mary Macgregor, through the thickening smoke. She ran one way; then, turning, the other way; and at either end the blast furnace of the fire met her. She heard no screams, for the roar of the fire drowned the screams; she gave no scream, for the smoke was choking her. She ran into somebody on her third turn, stumbled and died. (15)

Throughout the novel there is no mention of any eyewitness to Mary's end. We may also note that Mary is there described as if the narrator could share her senses ("she heard no screams," "the smoke was choking her.") This is the only time any character other than Sandy is interiorized at all, and even on this ground alone this episode seems conspicuously out of place in the text.⁴⁴

About sixty pages later, however, we are startled to see the scene repeated, though in a completely different context. It happens soon after the Brodie girls move from the Junior to the Senior school, where they take science lessons together:

Here, during the first week, an experiment was conducted which involved magnesium, in a test-tube which was made to tickle a bunsen flame. 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 (...) (76)

This strange phenomenon of an almost surrealistic *déjà-vu* stands out in a novel which is otherwise fairly realistic in terms of its plot. Alan Bold's suggestion that this episode demonstrates "the poetic force of a refrain" is not enough to solve the mysterious resemblance between the two scenes (71). What if, however, the first scene (the actual death of Mary) is in fact a product of the imagination, which derives its sources from the scene in the science room? It is, of course, Sandy's imagination that is in question here. Even though Sandy's presence is not mentioned in the science room scene, we can naturally assume that she is there and witnesses Mary's panic, as the girls have most of their classes in common.

This may seem to be a far-fetched proposition at first, but there is further evidence, albeit subtle, to support it. We have already seen Sandy's inexhaustible love of visualizing, but this tendency is in fact found in Miss Brodie as well. It is illustrated when she tries to get as much information as possible about the art master, her secret love, out of her girls:

But Miss Brodie could not hear enough versions of the same story if it involved Teddy Lloyd, and now that the girls had been to his house (...) Miss

Brodie was in a state of high excitement by very contact with these girls who had lately breathed Lloyd air. (90)

For this reason Miss Brodie's words, when talking to Sandy about Mary at the Braids Hills Hotel in 1946, a few years after Mary's death, are highly suggestive. Wondering if it was Mary who had betrayed her, Miss Brodie says (*italics added*): "Perhaps I should have been nicer to Mary (...) Well, it was tragic about Mary, *I picture that fire*, that poor girl." (60) This may lead us to ask whether Sandy pictures the fire as well, an association which is implicitly encouraged by the narrator, who stresses the parallel between the thoughts of Sandy and Miss Brodie by inserting the following two flashforwards together immediately after the science room scene:

Once, in later years, when Sandy was visited by Rose Stanley, and they fell to speaking of Mary Macgregor, Sandy said,

"When any ill befalls me I wish I had been kinder to Mary."

"How were we to know?" said Rose.

And Miss Brodie, sitting in the window of the Braid Hills Hotel with Sandy, had said: "I wonder if it was Mary Macgregor betrayed me? Perhaps I should have been kinder to Mary." (78)

The juxtaposition of these flashforwards seems to confirm that the order in which the episodes are narrated is determined by the way they are connected within Sandy's remembering consciousness. Sandy shares with Miss Brodie a deep feeling of guilt towards Mary, who they have always treated rather unkindly. It is plausible to assume that Sandy, haunted by remorse, painfully pictures in her mind the frantic Mary at her death. The strange refrain may then be seen as symbolizing Sandy's own mental repetition of the incident.

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So far I have demonstrated that the structure of

Spark's narrative in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* resembles that in *Child of Light*, in the way it represents the main character's vision of her past. Now we may come to question the widely-diffused view that Spark's attitude towards her own characters is that of God's towards human beings, which is described as "a kind of divine indifference" by Burgess and as "key-cold charity" by Kermodé (*Ninety-Nine Novels* 88; 216). To explore this point, I would first like to call attention to the central ideas which support Spark's view of Mary Shelley's life in *Child of Light*, which are illuminated by the narrative methods we have been discussing.

While Spark maintains a fairly objective view of the lives of Mary Shelley and those around her, there are moments when her narrative voice suddenly becomes charged with personal empathy. In the introduction to the biographical part of the text, for example, Spark defends Mary against the popular accusation that she remained lukewarm about the liberalist-feminist cause in order to be accepted by "society":

Let us see the alternative way of life which Mary rejected: We may take a parallel situation, I think without straining the point, in the present century. We all know (no loss to those who do not) the dilapidated Bright Young Things, phantoms from the 'twenties, who haunt the pubs of Soho as if seeking in those localities of earlier promise, some indistinct token of fulfillment like a glove inadvertently left behind them. Mary Shelley refused to become their nineteenth-century predecessor. (3-4)

Nobody who has read Spark's autobiography could fail to recognize that Spark is speaking here at least partly from her own experience. Before she started writing literary biographies, Spark had worked for about a year as an editor of a literary periodical called *Poetry Review* in London, which despite her efforts seems to have remained sadly second-rate. While in this position Spark had to put up with a great deal of nonsense from those who contributed their poetry to the review, and who obviously believed themselves to be "Bright

Young Things." "There is something about a passion for poetry that brings out a primitive reaction in non-poets, that is, the 'poetry-lovers,'" Spark says reminiscing about those days (*Curriculum* 173).

But Spark is apparently interested in as well as repelled by this "primitive reaction" of such individuals. Speculating on the cause of Mary's alienation after Shelley's death from her old friends, Spark proposes an interesting theory:

But there was another reason for the gradual withdrawal of her former friends: Brilliant though they were in youth and stimulated by such provocative elements as Byron and Shelley, none of them — Hogg, Trelawny and Hunt in particular — possessed that seed which germinates to maturity of character. They were all personality — flexible and unpredictable; and between their potentialities and their achievements squatted the unexorcised memory of their heady youth. Spiritually, if not intellectually, Hogg remained an undergraduate; Trelawny, a comic-opera buccaneer; even the gentle Hunt, an eloquent one-time martyr; and the *manqué* spirit took its revenge in each, by various displays of nastiness, much of it directed towards Mary Shelley before and after her death. (3)

This is an insightful piece of psychological analysis of these men, which must come from a deep understanding of their type. In fact, many of the "poetry-lovers" with whom Spark had to work as editor were men, and it sometimes happened that one of them should be attracted to her, only to be rejected by her both as a man and a poet. But, apparently, it was not only in men that Spark found her enemies, because she is equally severe on Claire Clairmont, Mary's sister-in-law. She says that Claire is "the type of young woman who today would be pleased to be known as 'arty,'" and that "there can be no more such insidious or inconvenient company for the truly creative mind, as this parasitic type of *manqué* individual." (45)

But my purpose is not merely to find parallels between the private experiences of Mary Shelley and

Spark. If we re-read the above passages carefully, we will see what Spark always has in mind in reviewing the lives of Mary and those around her. “Alternative way of life” — “dilapidated Bright Young Things” — “earlier promise” — “unexercised memory” — “*manqué* spirit” — “*manqué* individual”: all these phrases indicate a consciousness of an individual of the disparity between “potentialities” (be they real or imagined) and “achievements.”

Spark is clearly concerned with the duality which is present in anyone’s self-image, which reflects both what one could be, or could have been, and what one is. Every time an individual makes a choice, even if unconsciously, there are numerous other choices that he or she has rejected, or that have rejected her or him. Alan Bold’s comment is illuminating in relation to this subject:

Since *The Comforters* Spark’s interest in free will has been evident, for she continually considers the challenge of choice in a world dominated by deterministic theory and materialistic philosophy (...) Fiction is, traditionally, a deterministic form, yet Spark wishes to persuade the reader that life should not be taken for granted, as a *fait accompli*, as a matter of going through the motions. (91)

Interestingly, however, Spark often creates an almost obtrusively fatalistic atmosphere in her fiction, as if to counterbalance her characters’ effort to choose their own courses. She does this by means of presenting her story as something definitely and forever past, something that can only be regarded as a *fait accompli*. This is also true in *Child of Light*, where, for example, Spark uses such phrases as “some dramatic law” or “the tragic denouement” in recounting the events in Mary’s life (68). In other words, for Spark fate and free will are constantly at war, and therefore as one; likewise, the God-like omniscience of her narrators, which allow them to see the beginning and the end, necessarily invokes the desperately vain, yet genuinely human question: what could have happened, if this had not happened, or if that had happened?

Such questions are in fact precisely what comprise

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. The novel may be regarded as biographical insofar as its heroine, Miss Brodie, resembles Spark’s junior high school teacher in real life, who influenced her greatly as a young girl. When it was published in 1961, many of Spark’s old schoolmates quickly recognized their former teacher in Miss Brodie and wrote to express their nostalgic delight. Spark comments on the relationship between Miss Brodie and her own real teacher, Miss Christina Kay:

[In Miss Kay’s life] There could have been no question of a love-affair with the art master, or a sex-affair with the singing master, as in Miss Brodie’s life. But children are quick to perceive possibilities, potentialities: in a remark, perhaps in some remote context; in a glance, a smile. No, Miss Kay was not literally Miss Brodie, but I think Miss Kay had it in her, unrealized, to be the character I invented. (57)

Interestingly, Spark also once remarked in an interview, “completely unrealized potentialities, that’s what Jean Brodie represents.” The novel thus presents, in a Chinese-box structure, layers of reality and fiction. Miss Brodie’s character reflects, like a magic mirror, what Miss Kay had in her to become; Miss Brodie, in turn, desires to find in each Brodie girl, “in a magical transfiguration, a different Jean Brodie” (111).

We have seen that the “temporal omnipresence” of Sandy’s remembering consciousness is the unifying force behind the seemingly disorderly narrative structure of the novel. It is now time to ask what aspects of Miss Brodie and her girls it actually serves to illuminate. As David Lodge points out, the central question in the novel is not when and how Sandy betrays Miss Brodie, but why. What I wish to suggest is that this question is inseparable from the theme we have discussed in relation to *Child of Light*, i.e. the disparity between what one could be and what one is.

What makes Miss Brodie’s excellence as a teacher comes from her natural ability to stimulate the latent potentialities in her pupils. She is not unconscious of this power in herself, as is apparent in her famous

definition (or mis-definition) of education: "The word 'education' comes from the root *e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul"(36). But the girls are also alert to the latent potentialities of their teacher, and Sandy and Jenny perceive the love triangle among Miss Brodie and the two male teachers even before the grown-ups realize it themselves. What Miss Brodie's prime represents is essentially her awareness of everything she has in her to become; and the decline of her prime begins when reality harshly challenges her exhilarating sense of life's unlimited possibilities.

Paradoxically, however, Miss Brodie often shows a strong discontent when her girls explore and exercise their own potentialities without her approval. She criticizes Jenny for her dream of becoming an actress, saying archly that she would "never be a Fay Compton, far less a Sybil Thorndike"(126). On the other hand, Miss Brodie tries to impose on each girl some profession which she believes to be suitable for her, because "it was intolerable for Miss Brodie that any of the girls should grow up not largely dedicated to some vocation"(62). Miss Brodie herself proudly declares that she is dedicated to her girls in her prime; "You girls are my vocation," she says (23).

The idea of vocation is obviously one of Spark's central themes. In *Child of Light*, she often speculates about what might have been Mary Shelley's vocation had she been born into a different set of circumstances. When discussing Mary's contributions to *Lardner's Cyclopaedia*, for example, which included "a series of biographical and critical essays on Italian and Spanish writers," Spark praises her ability for objective study, and says regretfully:

This work, more than any other, serves to show a side of her temperament which cannot be detected in her letters and journals, and which remained a constant factor throughout her life. Had she lived a century later, given the necessary opportunities, Mary would have certainly have been a scholar in the vocational sense. (103)

On another occasion, Spark laments that Mary's talent as a writer came to be gradually diminished:

It is a tragic fact that Mary Shelley was not accepted by the society for which she pined. Held suspect by both the social and the "progressive" élites, she came, through time, to lose her vocational sense; she lost that image of herself as bearing a relationship to a community which the creative writer needs, even though the relationship be one of friction. (5-6)

When we consider Spark's concern with the "challenge of free choice" in a deterministic universe, it is interesting to ask where in that context the conception of vocation should be placed. In the most ideal sense of the word, vocation should be something in which the will of the individual and the will of Providence are as one. Spark apparently contemplates this possibility, but at the same time, she is not so optimistic as to suppose that such a happy harmony is always obtainable. One's sense of vocation may well be illusory, which may cause one to cling, tragically, to an utterly unsuitable life. One may also simply "keep looking" for God's bidding in vain. Spark seems to be pondering this danger, when she points out that Mary was frustrated by the mediocrity of her son, Percy Florence, who she vaguely yet strongly hoped would "shine in company, and (...) distinguish himself in some vocation."(106)

Spark implants in Miss Brodie this blind faith in vocation. And it is in fact her almost supercilious faith in her own vocation, made all the more intense by her inner sense of deprivation, that drives Miss Brodie to destruction. The self-paradoxical aspect of Miss Brodie's nature is sensed by Sandy long before it surfaces, when Miss Brodie takes the Brodie set on a tour around the Old Town of Edinburgh. Sandy is walking beside the slow-witted Mary and is nagging her as usual, when suddenly she feels like being kind to the girl, "[thinking] of the possibilities of feeling nice from being nice to Mary instead of blaming her"(30). Sandy's urge is checked, however, when she hears Miss Brodie's voice behind:

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. (30)

Here Sandy is experiencing the conflict between the idea of free will and the idea of predestination. She is associating the forbidding Calvinistic atmosphere of the Old Town with Miss Brodie who, ironically, is at the moment heard saying buoyantly, "You are all heroines in the making"(30).

Miss Brodie's religious discipline is also inherently paradoxical. The narrator observes that she goes to every church in Edinburgh other than those belonging to the Church of Rome, which she despises as being a "church of superstition." The narrator then adds a comment:

In some ways, her attitude was a strange one, because she was by temperament only suited 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, although this side was not otherwise greatly in evidence. (85)

The language used by the narrator in this passage significantly resembles Spark's own in *Child of Light*. The comment is made from a clearly retrospective viewpoint, and refers to what Miss Brodie could have been, as opposed to what she was. Miss Brodie's religious attitude as presented here is strangely reflected in her love relationships. While she is really in love with Teddy Lloyd, she renounces him because he is a Catholic married with children, and uses as his substitute Gordon Lowther, the singing master who is an Elder of the Scottish Church.

However, just as Miss Brodie is finally abandoned by Lowther who in despondency marries a science mistress instead, she is also punished by her falsification of Calvinism. Sandy is repelled by the malicious nature of Calvin's theory that God provides for everybody "a nasty surprise when they died"(108). Meanwhile Miss Brodie, made desperate by the impossibility of consummating her love for Lloyd, begins to think of being united to him vicariously through Rose. She repeats deliriously that Rose, with her "instinct," is destined to be his lover, while Sandy, with her "insight," is to become a spy, to bring back information about Rose's affair. Sandy then thinks to herself: "She thinks she is Providence (...) she thinks she is the God of Calvin."(120) And when she learns that Miss Brodie has encouraged a new student to go to Spain and fight for Franco, and that the girl has been killed as a result, Sandy goes straight to the headmistress, for the purpose of "putting a stop to Miss Brodie"(125). Sandy makes this decision because she realizes that Miss Brodie is now exploiting, instead of exploring, her girls' potentialities. Not willing to face her own limits, nor yet able to accept her fate, Miss Brodie abandons (though unconsciously) her vocation as a teacher, and tries to reconcile the conflicting elements in her life by believing herself to be a prophet figure— by turning her prime into a religion.

Being Miss Brodie's most loyal disciple, Sandy understands both her beauty and folly better than does any other Brodie girl. In fact, by the time Sandy betrays Miss Brodie, their lives are already inseparable from each other. Speaking of the final year of Miss Brodie's life, the narrator says: "This was her last year in the world and in another sense it was Sandy's"(56). Sandy at the convent is, therefore, spiritually dead, doomed to live endless hours in reminiscence of the irretrievable days with Miss Brodie. Only the title of her treatise represents a remnant of the magic of Miss Brodie, who spent her prime seeking to transfigure the commonplace.

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At the end of the biographical part of *Child of*

Light, we may recall at this point, Spark reflected on Mary's introspective remark that, in order to form happier friendships with others, she needed to be "a little tipsy."

I suppose it is the function of a biographer to diagnose, and not to indulge in vain retrospective prescribing. None the less I seriously suggest that if there had been more wine in Mary's life there would have been fewer tears (...) (121)

The feeling expressed in this comment is nothing that could be described as "divine indifference" or "key-cold charity." On the contrary, the perspective from which Spark views the life of Mary Shelley is very human. She wonders, with Mary herself, at the ups and downs of her life, and is not quite able to accept them as inevitable, unalterable as the history may be. One's life may appear to be a simple linear progress when seen in retrospect, and by a stranger. But for the living individual it is more like a maze, full of crossroads and dead-ends. The allegedly arrogant, God-like omniscience of Spark's narrative perspective and her use of time-shifts may be intended ultimately to suggest the uselessness of simply seeing the beginning and the end. Through her writing Spark leads us to realize that, even if the possibilities life grants us are limited, we should be always awake to the "hidden possibilities in all things."

Notes

- (1) The revised edition contains some important new facts about Mary's life as well as some other minor alterations. But my arguments in this essay are based on the original edition, since my main concern here is with Spark's skills of story-telling before she became a novelist.
- (2) Spark had read Grylls' biography before starting her own work and most likely had it in mind while she wrote. Both authors based their studies on more or less the same sources. Spark relied for information on F. L. Jones' *Mary Shelley*

Journals (1947), which in turn relied in part on Grylls' work. Spark also consulted Jones' *Letters of Mary Shelley* (1944), the information included in which Grylls had obtained from Jones years before its publication. In short, Spark was able to use whatever documents Grylls used.

- (3) Immediately preceding the description of Mary's death, the narrator gives us an account of Mary's disappointing love affair, and of her subsequent thought that the happiest days in her life had been the very first days she spent with Miss Brodie. There is no evidence throughout the text that any of this is communicated at all to any other character. We should recall, however, that each of the Brodie girls, except Mary, tells Sandy one private episode some time after graduating from Marcia Blaine. From this we may imagine that Mary did tell Sandy about the episode as well, though the moment of the confession is omitted, Mary being dead at the end of the novel. Moreover, the scene of Mary's death is followed by a description of Sandy's thought about the happiest days in her own life, which again connects this apparently isolated episode with Sandy's consciousness. Sandy's general inquisitiveness should also be taken into consideration. But, just like Mary's death scene itself, any speculation about this is ultimately unascertainable.
- (4) The case of Jenny in Rome does not count here, because her inner feelings related by the narrator in that scene are known to Sandy at the latest point in the story time.

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