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“There’s Something about Mary:”
Narrative and Ethics in
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

Peter Robert Brown

In “The Desegregation of Art,” Muriel Spark questions the moral and political effectiveness of “socially-conscious art,” art which depicts with pathos suffering and victimization.¹ Although she admires the “marvelous tradition” of such art, she claims that it “isn’t achieving its end or illuminating our lives any more” (34). This is because it allows for a self-congratulatory moral earnestness that is often exhausted once a given work has been safely consumed. Speaking more specifically about readers of novels and spectators of plays, she suggests that many of them “feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel” (34–5). For example, in experiencing pity for the underdog, individuals might believe that they have adequately responded to a work, and it will cease to have any further effect on them; in such cases, Spark claims, art is segregated from life, since readers and audience members are not truly forced to confront the facts and conditions a specific work seeks to address. Instead of art that affectively portrays suffering and victimization, Spark recommends ironic and satiric art which, she believes, allows for a greater inter-penetration of art and life. She does not claim that satiric and ironic art directly affects our conduct; rather, she suggests that it can be more ethically and politically potent than socially-

conscious art because it can have a greater and deeper impact on some of the grounds from which we act, namely, our perceptions, interpretations, and understandings of reality. According to Spark, ironic and satiric art can help to change the ways in which we see the world, and these alterations can be substantive and enduring, cognitive and emotional.

Spark's ideas about the moral and political efficacy of irony and satire are crucial to understanding her best-known novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and, in this essay, I explore Spark's suggestions by analyzing the theme of victimization in the novel and examining how the novel represents and exposes the process of victimization while simultaneously refusing any simple empathetic identification with the victim. My primary focus is Mary Macgregor, the scapegoat of "the Brodie set," and I consider the ways in which Mary is victimized not only by Miss Brodie and her set but also by the narrator and the narrative of the novel. Miss Brodie and her favorite students reduce Mary from an end in herself to a means to an end, and the narrator and narrative of the novel often collude with that reduction. Moreover, Spark draws readers' attention to Mary's victimization by ironically and satirically depicting the activity of narrating and the often dubious authority on which it rests, for the novel illustrates the ways in which institutional authority and power can produce and legitimate malevolent narratives that place limits on how individuals are interpreted. Early in the novel, Mary is identified as stupid and lump-like, and these characterizations mark her as the accepted, blameable victim of the Brodie set and determine her role in the set's various narratives. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* portrays the ethical and political dangers inherent in narrative and narrating and offers a broad critique of institutionalized power and the narrative authority that such power often assumes.² The book is no mere fable, however, and Spark offers readers no simple moral lesson; rather, she involves readers in the victimization of Mary and, through her irony, enables them to become aware of that involvement.³ Such awareness can have real moral and political impact, since readers are encouraged to acknowledge their participation in victimization in the actual world and to reflect on the role that narrative plays in the process and justification of victimization.

The essay is divided into four sections. In the first, I consider the point of view from which the novel is told. Many of Spark's critics have suggested that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is narrated by an omniscient

narrator; however, I argue that there are good reasons to question the narrator's epistemic and ethical authority and that this questioning enables readers to challenge the narrator's characterization of Mary. The second section offers a discussion of narrative and narration as themes of the novel, and I examine how these aspects of the novel reinforce Mary's victimization. In the third section, I situate the scapegoating of Mary within a more general theoretical and philosophical discussion of narrative and ethics. I conclude by revisiting the narrator and narration of the novel, and I demonstrate how Spark encourages readers not only to question the narrative and the narrative discourse of the novel itself but also to reflect on the ethics and politics of narrative more generally. I suggest that such reflection can have the moral and political impact that Spark desires from ironic and satiric art.

Narrative Authority:

The Narrator's Epistemic and Ethical Orientations

Spark's critics have examined how *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* explores the epistemological and ethical issues concerning narrative,⁴ and they have analyzed the intricacies of Spark's narrative methods and the moral themes of the novel.⁵ But the ethical nuances of Spark's narrative discourse have not been sufficiently examined. In its theme and method and in its story and discourse the novel illustrates how narrative is always bound up with questions of the good and with questions about power and authority; these concerns are central to Mary's victimization. Before examining the latter, I consider the narrator and the narrator's authority.

As many narratologists and others have insisted, literary narrative presupposes a narrator.⁶ Whether narrators of fictional works are best understood as mere "linguistic subjects" and "functions," as characters, or as fictional or real persons is a theoretical question whose details need not concern us.⁷ For present purposes, it is the relationship between author and narrator that matters. In "My Conversion," Spark claims that the narrators of her novels are characters who are separate and distinct from her and who have "consistent point[s] of view" different from her own (62). It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to perceive or reconstruct an actual character responsible for the narration of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; nevertheless, given Spark's assertions, it is worthwhile to attempt to charac-

terize the point of view from which the story is told and to describe the various orientations of the narrator. I focus on two such orientations, the epistemic and the ethical.⁸

What we can call the narrator's "epistemic authority" is established early in the novel. At its beginning, we meet five of the six members of the Brodie set as they stand outside the Marcia Blaine School and talk to boys. It is 1936, and we are told that all of the girls are "famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking" (6). Here, the narrator immediately qualifies the initial labeling of the girls, for the narrator interprets their "fame" and ironically comments on its meaning. Leaving aside questions about who does not like the girls and who holds them in suspicion, we can say that the narrator's gloss on the girls' fame introduces the familiar disjunction between appearance and reality and helps to establish the narrator's epistemic authority; the narrator is able to offer readers accurate interpretations of various phenomena because she possesses information unavailable to specific characters and knows more than they.

This authority remains constant throughout much of the novel, and the narrator frequently interprets, qualifies, and comments upon the speech and actions of various characters, often revealing motives and meanings not readily apparent to the characters themselves. For example, the narrator explains the formation of the Brodie set by disclosing Miss Brodie's reasons for choosing her pets:

Miss Brodie had [by 1931] already selected her favourites, or rather those whom she could trust; or rather those whose parents she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy, these parents being either too enlightened to complain or too unenlightened, or too awed by their good fortune in getting their girls' education at endowed rates, or too trusting to question the value of what their daughters were learning at this school of sound reputation (26)

We could read the first two subordinate clauses of this sentence as speculative interpretations, but the adverb "rather" suggests that the narrator is,

in fact, exposing Miss Brodie's complex and hidden motives, knowledge of which the narrator shares with readers.

Given the narrator's superior knowledge, we might, like many critics, call her omniscient.⁹ This characterization is reinforced when we consider the novel's many prolepses.¹⁰ However, given the theoretical problems with the term "omniscient,"¹¹ it might be more useful to employ Gérard Genette's terms and identify the narrator as both "heterodiegetic," external to the story, and "extradiegetic," (epistemically) superior to it.¹² In either case, the narrator's "position" relative to the narrative enables her to comment ironically and sometimes humorously on the action and characters.

But the narrator's epistemic authority is qualified. Readers are told, for instance, that it "was impossible to know how much Miss Brodie planned by deliberation, or how much she worked by instinct alone" (79). Perhaps this statement is related by the narrator but focalized through a character. Much of the novel is focalized through Sandy Stranger, and Sandy's changing feelings and beliefs about Miss Brodie are central topics of the novel; hence, we might be tempted to attribute this admission of ignorance to Sandy. However, the cited passage makes no reference to her or to others, so it is more likely that the narrator is admitting her own (and others') epistemic limits by acknowledging that Miss Brodie remains opaque.

There are other moments where we can question the narrator's epistemic authority. In one prolepsis, Eunice Gardiner discusses Miss Brodie with her husband; we read, "'When we go to Edinburgh,' she said, 'remind me while we're there to go and visit Miss Brodie's grave'" (27). In the same scene, Eunice says, "'I must take flowers to her grave . . .'" (27). On the next page, we are told of "little Eunice Gardiner who, twenty-eight years later, said of Miss Brodie, 'I must visit her grave' . . ." (28). Notice the slight but real differences between the first two narrations and the third, which seems to combine the first two. There are several ways to interpret these discrepancies. With the third narration, the narrator might be citing an utterance by Eunice that does not appear in the preceding scene. Or the narrator might assume that visiting someone's grave includes taking flowers to it, so the third telling is a summary of the first two. Maybe the narrator is being careless, not paying close attention to her own narrating. Most simply, the narrator might not perceive any real or important distinction between the narrations. We do not need to exclude any of these interpretations. Still, since all three passages are instances of direct dis-

course, we should consider both the specific thematic significance and the more general narratological import of these variations, especially since we encounter similar narrative discrepancies, moments in which the narrator offers slightly different versions of the same event.¹³

The differences in narration, combined with the narrator's acknowledgment of her own limitations, reveal limits to her knowledge of the events she relates and the characters she describes. The narrator can, thus, be characterized as fallible, even unreliable. This does not totally undermine her epistemic authority but does give substance to Spark's claim that her narrators are characters, since most fictional characters, like real people, are fallible. The narrative discrepancies also illustrate a significant fact about narrative, namely, that all narratives involve the selection, arrangement, and labeling of events and are, therefore, partial, in two ways: all narratives are limited in perspective, and they are all incomplete, insofar as they depict only certain events.

The essentially partial nature of narrative and, indeed, of human understanding is central to Spark's work. Elaborating on her discussion of the word "nevertheless," Joseph Hynes argues that the "nevertheless principle" means "that any position taken or point made has another side," and he argues that critics must appreciate this if they are accurately to understand her fiction (*Critical 2*). We might suppose, then, that the narrator presents only one side of the story and that other sides are perceivable, however obliquely. We can go further. If the narrator's epistemic authority enables her to comment ironically on the characters and their actions, then the narrator's limitations enable Spark to comment ironically on the narrator. Since the narrative is related by the narrator, Spark's irony is more difficult to detect than the narrator's; it is up to readers both to discern this authorial irony and to identify points of view other than the narrator's. This becomes possible when we consider the narrator's ethical orientations.

I return to the novel's first scene. Significantly, Mary Macgregor is not initially standing with the other girls, but she soon joins them: "Along came Mary Macgregor, the last member of the set, whose fame rested on her being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame" (8). Since we have already witnessed the narrator's ironic comments on the girls' fame, we could read this passage too as ironic: the narrator is describing not Mary but her "fame" and the ways in which she is perceived

and treated by others. This depends upon seeing the narrator as separate from the community in which the girls are famous. But in telling us that Mary's fame rests on her "*being* a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame," the narrator could be agreeing with and authorizing specific ontological claims about Mary, that she *is* a silent lump, that she *is* a nobody whom everybody can blame. If the latter reading is feasible, it might compromise the ironic distance between the narrator and those who perceive Mary in these ways.

Such a reading gains support when we consider a scene that occurs several pages later but six years earlier in the story. Miss Brodie, noticing that Mary is not paying attention, asks her what she is looking at. Before reading Mary's response, we read, "Mary sat lump-like and too stupid to invent something. She was too stupid ever to tell a lie; she didn't know how to cover up" (11). This disturbing, even jolting, description of Mary differs markedly from the first. In the first, the narrator's orientation to Mary and her fame is ambiguous; it might be ironic, or it might not be. Here, the narrator's description of Mary actually contributes to that fame; in labeling Mary lump-like and stupid, the narrator endorses certain opinions and judgements about her. Moreover, if readers accept the narrator's description, then they might find themselves among those who identify Mary as stupid and lump-like.¹⁴ Drawing on the concept of focalization, one could, perhaps, insist that the second description of Mary is ironic: the narrator adopts the language of Miss Brodie and her set but does not condone their judgements. But, again, the context from which the quotation is drawn suggests that the second description of Mary reveals the narrator's own evaluations of Mary, even if they agree with Miss Brodie and her set's. Finally, we could treat this description of Mary as objective; after all, many of the narrator's descriptions of the characters are true in the fiction. Perhaps Mary is lump-like—whatever that might be—and slow-witted, and the narrator is merely informing readers of this. Even so, the narrator's description of Mary involves evaluations which, although they might also be aesthetic, are primarily ethical.

Let's assume that Mary is mentally slower than the other children. Still, in calling her "stupid," the narrator expresses disdain for Mary and conveys her own sense of intellectual superiority. More importantly, the narrator identifies and characterizes a trait that is somehow significant, that somehow matters, for intelligence is valued by all kinds of people for

all kinds of reasons, even though it is notoriously difficult to define and quantify.¹⁵ But to say that intelligence is valued is not yet to say that it is ethically valued. What links intelligence to ethics are various conceptions of the good life, conceptions that run deep in Western culture and in which reason, intelligence, thoughtfulness, reflection, and so on are seen as virtues that contribute to human flourishing. Plato's ideal republic in which philosophers rule is a famous example of this tendency. I am not claiming that the narrator subscribes to some detailed philosophical notion of the good life, nor am I suggesting that we ought conceptually separate ethics from intelligence; rather, I am arguing that, in identifying Mary as "stupid," the narrator is ethically judging her, evaluating her moral worth, and endorsing the judgements of Miss Brodie, who repeatedly calls Mary stupid. We should also consider the primary setting in which Mary's alleged stupidity manifests itself, Miss Brodie's classroom. Classrooms are places where estimations of students' intelligence are frequently based upon their good or bad performance of particular tasks and where evaluations of intelligence and moral worth can become confused. Many readers of this essay have spent years in classrooms, as students and instructors, and I appeal to their experiences of the ways in which intellectual strengths and weaknesses can be interpreted as moral virtues and failings. The narrator's description of Mary as stupid is an ethical evaluation, one that accords with Miss Brodie's and one that the narrator reiterates throughout the novel.

We can say similar things about the description of Mary as "lump-like" although it is not precisely clear what the term means; presumably it means "dull" or "sluggish" or, perhaps, "indefinite"—it might even mean "fat." In any case, the narrator again isolates a characteristic, one relating to Mary's appearance, that is somehow significant, but, in this case, the narrator's judgement is not so clearly aligned with Miss Brodie's. Although Miss Brodie admires art and beauty—pictorial art is her self-declared passion (66)—and although she cares much about appearances—she says to Mary, "And if you can't take an interest in what I'm saying, please try to look as if you do" (16)—Miss Brodie never calls Mary "lump-like." Miss Brodie does tend to conflate ethics and aesthetics but does not seem to judge Mary's appearance as an ethical failing. Presumably, in characterizing Mary as lump-like, the narrator is concurring with the judgements of whichever group among whom Mary is "famous" for

being so, whether that group is the Brodie set, the broader student body, or the school in general. We are painfully familiar with the ways in which a person's appearance and manner are sometimes mistaken for ethical attributes, especially among schoolchildren; in fact, the narrator's description of Mary resembles that which we might expect from a school bully.

The description of Mary as stupid and lump-like is cruel and reductive and points to the ethical issues involved in representing persons. As Adam Zachary Newton suggests, persons are "subverted" in many different ways, "by projections of 'character upon them, for example, or the indiscreet effacement of discrete selves through typification" (55). Since Mary is not a real person, she cannot be subverted to the same extent as can actual persons; nevertheless, within the fiction, we do sometimes glimpse other aspects of her personality, so we can say that the narrator's initial description of Mary diminishes her and fails to represent other sides of her personhood. Moreover, we read the narrator's description of Mary before we read other characters' responses to her and before we see her behave in ways that lead others to identify her as stupid, so if we take the narrator's discourse as authoritative, then we might also accept her characterization of Mary as sufficient, as telling us what we need to know about her. If the narrator colludes with those who victimize Mary, then readers too might take part in that victimization.

The narrator's labelling of Mary is related to the novel's broader concerns with the ethics of description and naming. For example, whether or in what ways Sandy actually "betrays" Miss Brodie remains an open interpretive question, and interpretations of Sandy's actions must appeal to ethical considerations. More generally, we can say that descriptions of persons and their actions are almost always ethically charged. The specific point is that the narrator's descriptions of Mary reveal some of the narrator's ethical biases.

I pause here to offer some preliminary conclusions about the narrator's epistemic and ethical orientations. The narrator is not always reliable, since there are good epistemic and even better ethical reasons not entirely to trust her. I believe that Spark desires her readers to question the narrator's orientations and that this questioning reveals a second-level irony in which the narrator herself becomes an object of irony. In encouraging readers to question the narrator's epistemic and ethical authority, Spark also encourages them to question the relationships between power and

narrative, for the authority that the narrator assumes in the very act of narrating—her narrative power—is rendered suspect by her epistemic limitations and ethical values.¹⁶ Now, the narrator is more multi-faceted than my analysis suggests, and I return to her below. Presently, however, I turn to the narrative and narration of the novel in order to see how they too participate in Mary's victimization and how they too are among Spark's targets.

Victimizing Mary: Narrative and Narration

Narrative is both an implicit and explicit subject of the novel. So too is narration or narrative discourse, for, like many modernists and postmodernists, Spark draws attention to the ways in which the story is told and thereby ensures that narrative discourse becomes a theme that readers must consider. In this section, I discuss narrative as subject before turning to Spark's narrative methods.

At the end of the first chapter, Miss Brodie asks Mary a question, and Sandy whispers to Mary the wrong answer which Mary then utters aloud. This occurs in 1930, and, significantly, Mary is described as "lumpy, with merely two eyes, a nose and a mouth like a snowman" and proleptically as "*later* famous for being stupid and always to blame" (13–14, my emphasis). This is a strange prolepsis. On the one hand, the narrator indicates that Mary is not yet famous for being stupid and blameable. In fact, the narrator acknowledges that Mary's reputation, like the other girls' reputations and, indeed, like all reputations, will be established over time. Hence, Mary's fame is the result of a certain narrative, one that identifies her and reidentifies her as stupid, lump-like, and, therefore, blameable. Moreover, her fame casts her in a specific role within the Brodie set, one that tends to exhaust her character and determine how she will be treated in the future. The proleptic description of Mary might encourage readers to follow this narrative in order to see how she gains her reputation. On the other hand, because the prolepsis occurs after the narrator herself has described Mary as stupid and lump-like, we can say that Mary's purported stupidity does not depend on narrative in the same way as do the other girls' reputations. Mary is characterized as stupid and lump-like from the outset. Still, the narrator has not described Mary as blameable, and we are

invited to watch the process by which she becomes so, how she is repeatedly singled out and blamed by Miss Brodie.

We are also invited to watch the processes by which the other girls gain their fame. In the first chapter, the narrator refers to Rose and Jenny as girls who “later” become famous for sex and beauty, respectively. As we read the novel, we see that some of the girls’ reputations reflect real aspects of their personalities but that others are only partially earned or largely unfounded. Rose, though “famous for sex,” has little interest in it: “Rose was greatly popular with these boys, which was the only reason why she was famed for sex, although she did not really talk about sex, far less indulge it” (110). More pointed is Miss Brodie’s misinterpretation of Rose:

Rose, who later, while still in her teens, was to provoke Miss Brodie’s amazement and then her awe and finally her abounding enthusiasm for the role which Rose then *appeared* to be enacting: that of a great lover, magnificently elevated above the ordinary run of lovers, above the moral laws. Venus incarnate, something set apart. In fact, Rose was not at the time in question engaged in the love affair which Miss Brodie thought she was, but it *seemed* so, and Rose was *famous for sex*. (38, my italics)

The girls’ various reputations rest primarily upon Miss Brodie, who identifies and misidentifies their skills and attributes and characterizes and mischaracterizes them accordingly. Miss Brodie also believes that, in some cases, the girls’ lives will conform to narrative trajectories that follow from their characters as she herself has described them. This is why so many commentators describe Miss Brodie as a maker of fictions. For the most part, the girls do not live out these narratives. Sandy’s actions in the later chapters of the novel—her affair with Teddy Lloyd, her “betrayal” of Miss Brodie, her conversion to Roman Catholicism—are motivated in part by her desire to prove that Miss Brodie is not Providence, not, like the “God of Calvin, able to see “the beginning and the end” (120). These phrases are Sandy’s, but we do not need to accept her hyperbolic rhetoric to see that Miss Brodie attempts to write “master narratives” in which the

girls lives are subsumed into Miss Brodie's own story, the story of her prime.¹⁷

But what about Mary? Whereas the reputations of the other girls are qualified, even negated, by the narrator's irony as well as by the unfolding of the plot, Mary's reputation seems fixed; she remains stupid, lump-like, and blameable. In part, this is achieved through the narrator's and Miss Brodie's repeated descriptions of her as stupid, but it is also achieved through the proleptic narration of her death.

We learn of this at the end of the first chapter, but the second chapter begins with a much more detailed account of her death in a hotel fire:

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)

The possible effects of this depiction of Mary's death are ethically salient.¹⁸ Since we know when and how she will die, Mary's life seems to be teleologically oriented towards this specific death. This sense of inevitability is underscored when, later in the novel, we read of Mary's behavior in the chemistry classroom after being frightened by magnesium flares: "Hither and thither she ran in panic between the benches until she was caught by and induced to calm down, and she was told not to be so stupid by Miss Lockhart, who had already learnt the exasperation of looking at Mary's face, its two eyes, nose and mouth, with nothing more to say about it" (76-7).¹⁹ This scene occurs later in the discourse but earlier in the story, and when we encounter it, we might retroactively see Mary's death as having even more inevitability than it has when it is initially related to us. We might recall the phrase "ran hither and thither" from another early reference to her death: "'Sandy won't talk to me,' said Mary who later, in that hotel fire, ran hither and thither till she died" (28). The phrase appears once more, near the end of the novel, when we are told that Sandy "heard again from Miss Brodie at the time of Mary Macgregor's death, when the girl ran hither and thither in the hotel fire and was trapped

by it" (126–7). Mary's behavior when she dies resembles her behavior in the chemistry class, and her responses to flames suggest a characteristic pattern of behavior. More noteworthy, however, is the motif, the discourse, which unites the two incidents; the phrase "ran hither and thither" suggests the irrational and thoughtless behavior of one who has little sense or understanding. Because Mary has already been called stupid by the narrator, we might see her death as a sad but fitting end and even as following from her character, even though there is no reason to believe that she would have escaped had she been more intelligent.²⁰ What is more, our knowledge of her death might lead us to overlook or trivialize the processes by which she becomes blameable. If so, then the prolepsis that depicts her death might counteract our curiosity about the specific narrative in which she becomes "a nobody whom everybody could blame."

We can say, then, that the content of the novel's narrative and the way in which events are related contribute to Mary's victimization. In suggesting that the narrative and narration collude with the victimization of Mary, I am not attributing intentions or agency to these aspects of the text; rather I am arguing that the novel's narrative and narrative discourse reinforce Mary's role of scapegoat.

Mary as Scapegoat: The Ethics of Narrative

That Mary is the scapegoat of the Brodie set is a critical commonplace, and Miss Brodie's treatment of her is frequently interpreted as underscoring Miss Brodie's Fascist and Nazi sympathies.²¹ Some critics argue that Mary's death by fire parallels the killing and cremation of Jews in the Holocaust. Although Miss Brodie does not actually kill Mary, such interpretations are, I think, sound. But Mary becomes a scapegoat in part because she is labeled stupid, and we should recall that among the Nazi's first victims were those deemed "congenitally feeble-minded."²²

As scapegoat, Mary's status within the Brodie set is ambiguous. Patrick J. Whiteley argues that "Mary is an insider at the same time that she is the scapegoat" (89) But, in some senses, Mary is both inside and outside of the set, for she can be expelled from it whenever convenience dictates. We might, here, recall Jacques Derrida's discussion of "Plato's Pharmacy" and consider Mary as *pharmakon*, both poison and remedy, and *pharmakos*, ritual sacrificial victim. In one scene, the art teacher

Teddy Lloyd shows the girls Botticelli's *Primavera*, and they start to laugh as his pointer traces the figures' buttocks. In response to their "philistine" laughter, "Miss Brodie grasped Mary's arm, jerked her to her feet and propelled her to the door where she thrust her outside and shut her out, returning as one who had solved the problem. As indeed she had, for the violent action sobered the girls and made them feel that, in the official sense, an unwanted ring-leader had been apprehended and they were no longer in the wrong" (50). Following René Girard's claims about many persecutors, we can say that Miss Brodie does not understand what she is doing, that she erroneously believes that Mary is to blame. This becomes clear later when Miss Brodie blames Mary for having broken some of Mr. Lowther's china: "'Mary Macgregor must have chipped it,' she said. 'Mary was here last Sunday with Eunice and they washed up together. Mary must have chipped it'" (88). We could, employing the term broadly, invoke Girard's notion of a "persecution text" to interpret the narratives in which Miss Brodie and her set place Mary. For Girard, a persecution text is an historical document written from the point of view of the persecutors that does not attempt to conceal their persecution, since the author of the text believes in the guilt of the innocent, persecuted victim.²³ Insofar as Miss Brodie and her set situate Mary in various narratives, we can say that, metaphorically, they write persecution texts. Girard's analyses of the scapegoat are illuminating, but a Girardian reading of the novel would be incomplete, since Mary's victimization requires an interpretation that relies on more traditional ethical concepts.

For Miss Brodie and her set, Mary is defined functionally. Whereas the other girls are characterized and mischaracterized by some positive attribute or skill, Mary is characterized primarily by her role within the Brodie set and the ways in which the other members of the set are entitled and encouraged to treat her. More accurately, she is *first* characterized as stupid and lump-like, and her role and function as scapegoat *follow* from those descriptions. It is precisely Mary's status as scapegoat that illustrates the way in which she is reduced from an end in herself to a means to others' ends, and these others include Miss Brodie, her set, the narrator, and the narrative of the novel.

To speak of means and ends is to invoke Kant, specifically the second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any

other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (96). Given the claims of much postmodern theory, some readers might find it deeply mistaken to cite Kant, a chief representative of philosophical modernity. Kant’s ethical theory, like many ethical theories, is grounded upon what Charles Taylor calls a “moral ontology,” an “ontology of the human” from which moral and ethical consequences follow (5–8), and Kant stresses reason and rationality. We know from post-Enlightenment history that interpretations of these concepts have been marred by various biases—racial, ethnic, gender, and class, for instance—so despite the universalist pretensions of Enlightenment morality, it has all too often been exclusionary. Moreover, much contemporary theory is deeply informed by various Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean critiques of ontology, and the very idea of a moral ontology might set off philosophical alarm bells for some literary critics and theorists. I suspect that this partly explains some theorists’ desire to move beyond ontology by embracing Levinasian “alterity” and the ways in which “the other whom I encounter is always radically in excess of what my ego, my cognitive powers, consciousness or intuitions would make of him or her” (Gibson 25). Although such language risks overstatement, alterity is a vital ethical concept, and there are two features of it that are pertinent here: its universality and its stress on the moral worth of persons as ends in themselves. This is not at all to claim that Levinas’s ethics are really Kantian; rather, it is to argue that one can subscribe to the categorical imperative without accepting Kant’s moral ontology.

Spark herself is Roman Catholic and has claimed that her faith provides her with “a norm from which one can depart” (“My Conversion” 26). Presumably, her moral ontology concerns the soul and humans’ resemblance to the Judeo-Christian God. But in keeping with the distance Spark establishes between herself and her characters and narrator, the novel does not insist on a Christian or Catholic ontology, and the moral points pressed do not require readers to accept one. Furthermore, the categorical imperative would seem to be consistent with at least some Catholic tenets; in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II claimed that “the human individual cannot be subordinated as a pure means or a pure instrument, either to the species or to society; he [sic] has value per se. He is a person” (Pinker 186).

Whatever our moral ontology, even if we subscribe to none, I suspect

that we can agree that the categorical imperative articulates something important about persons: that they are worthy of respect simply because they are persons. As Raimond Gaita movingly suggests, to recognize persons as beings of ultimate worth is to see them as unique limits to our will (24). This is where Miss Brodie and others fail; in treating Mary as a function, a mere place-holder, they attempt to subject her to their wills and refuse to see her as an end in herself.

Part of what it means to treat a person as an end in herself is to recognize and respect her hopes, desires, aspirations, self-interpretations, and so on.²⁴ We can give a narrative interpretation to these notions of respect and recognition. We can say that, ideally, persons ought to be able to be the *authors* or, since there are always limits to a person's autonomy, *coauthors* of their own life-stories.²⁵ In less metaphorical terms, persons should be allowed to articulate many of their own ends and should be allowed to attempt to achieve them. This means treating persons as agents, as subjects of narrative.²⁶ When we consider Mary, we see that she is never the subject of narrative but is always subjected to narrative. If we want to talk about Mary as an end, we can do so only ironically, for we can really only talk about her ultimate end, her death, about which we are almost immediately informed. For us, Mary's life ends almost as soon as we encounter her.

Participating and Resisting: Narrator, Reader, and Victimization

Above, I suggested that Spark intends that readers be disturbed by her narrator's initial description of Mary as stupid and lump-like. This description can be juxtaposed with another scene, where, I suspect, readers are also jolted. This occurs on the girls' walk through one of the poor districts of Edinburgh. As they walk, Sandy considers being kind to Mary, but when she hears Miss Brodie's voice, she becomes terrified: "She was even more frightened then, by her temptation to be nice to Mary Macgregor, since by this action she would separate herself, and be lonely, and blameable in a more dreadful way than Mary who, although officially the faulty one, was at least inside Miss Brodie's category of heroines in the making" (30) As Whiteley notes, "To be kind to Mary would be to become Mary without even her promissary note" (91). In order to avoid becoming the outsider, Sandy, "for good fellowship's sake," asserts her fidelity to

Miss Brodie and the set by cruelly telling Mary, “‘I wouldn’t be walking with *you* if Jenny was here’” (30, original italics). Sandy, thus, accepts and confirms Mary’s status as scapegoat.

Prior to this moment, however, we see both Sandy and Miss Brodie scolding Mary, and the narrator describes Mary simply as “the nagged child” (29). The straightforwardness and ethical aptness of this description are arresting because they reveal truths concealed by the repeated descriptions of Mary as stupid, lump-like, and blameable; the term “child” points to Mary’s youngness, and the word “nagged” indicates the mean-spiritedness of those who berate her. This description undercuts others, even if it “is a gross understatement” (Murray and Tait 102). We can compare the description of Mary as “the nagged child” to the repeated references to Miss Brodie’s students as “little girls” and “small girls” that pepper the book’s early pages and that are made by the narrator, Miss Brodie, and Miss Mackay. Allan Massie suggests that readers easily forget that the members of the Brodie set “are very little girls when they come properly under Miss Brodie’s influence” (46), but Spark insists that readers remember this, and the narrator’s and characters’ language forces us to do so. The narrator’s description of Mary as a “nagged child” has a similar role in the narration and complicates the previous discussion of the narrator’s complicity in victimizing Mary, since this description is deeper and more generous. There are other moments when the narrator acknowledges Mary’s suffering: when we are told of Mary’s failed love affair and when we learn that Mary believes that Latin and shorthand are the same. In the latter instant, we read, “Mary was established in the wrong again, being tortured with probing questions, and generally led on to confess to the mirth-shaken world her notion that Latin and shorthand were one” (83).

These passages lead us to reexamine the narrator’s ethical orientation and to consider the possible effects of such passages on readers. Because she occasionally foregrounds Mary’s suffering, the narrator’s ethical orientation seems more complex than I’ve argued above. Perhaps she is more sympathetic and more open to Mary’s personhood than it often appears. However, it is also possible that the narrator perceives Mary’s pain and distress but continues to call her stupid and lump-like because the narrator finds these aspects of her personality more ethically important; the narrator constantly reminds readers that, whatever else she might be, Mary is stupid and lumpish. What is more, it is not clear what kinds of effects the

more sympathetic passages might have on readers. Although they offer readers a richer glimpse of Mary's humanity, in them, Mary herself is mostly silent, as she is throughout the novel, as she is when she dies; hence, I am not sure whether the more sympathetic passages enable or even encourage readers to form any real empathetic identification with Mary. We might pity Mary, just as we might be appalled by the ways in which she is treated, but the narration and narrative complicate such responses.

In fact, it is tempting to say that readers participate in Mary's victimization. If we unquestioningly accept the narrator's descriptions of Mary as stupid and lump-like—and, besides her name, we are given few other characteristics by which we can identify and reidentify her—we risk joining those who so label her and victimize her, even if we find their behavior ethically atrocious. But the novel is more complicated than this, since Spark's irony invites readers to resist the narrator's discourse and to question the ethics of the narratives to which Mary is subjected. The moral force of the novel resides precisely in the ways that it implicates readers in Mary's victimization while simultaneously enabling them to recognize that implication. It is, then, an exaggeration to claim that readers simply participate in the victimization of Mary. Moreover, readers and characters occupy different ontological realms, and readers cannot be held morally accountable for actions undertaken by characters in a fiction. Readers are more like witnesses than actors, but, as we know from so many historical examples, witnessing is often far from ethically neutral.²⁷ Since we cannot intervene in the events depicted in the novel, we might consider ourselves to be impotent witnesses; however, we can respond ethically to those events, to the ways in which they are narrated, and to the epistemic and ethical orientations that influence and shape the narrator's discourse. Spark, then, does not merely illustrate the ethical dangers that accompany narrative and narration; she also encourages readers to acknowledge and reflect upon the ways in which they, as readers, are deeply involved in such issues. She achieves the latter goals through her sophisticated irony which helps to establish a critical, if often unstable, distance between narrator and characters, and between readers and the narrator, narrative and narration of the novel.

Thus far, I have discussed only the experience of reading and responding to the novel, and Spark's claims about the desegregation of art have a

much wider scope. Furthermore, although I have examined Spark's irony, I have not yet considered the novel as satire. In order briefly to address the latter, I return to two passages cited above.²⁸ When Miss Brodie expels Mary from the art room, we are told that the girls feel that "in the official sense, an unwanted ring-leader had been apprehended" (50). And we have seen that Sandy believes Mary to be "officially the faulty one" (30). The terms "official" and "officially" suggest that the Brodie set is an institution; in fact, we are told that the Brodie set's disinterest in the school's house system becomes "an institution, to be respected like the house system itself" (112). As previously noted, Mary's stupidity is institutionally defined, since she is identified as unintelligent in the classroom where intelligence is equated with specific aptitudes and skills. Agreeing with other critics, we can say that the ultimate satiric targets of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are human institutions, for Spark's novel shows how institutions and institutional power often reductively represent individuals and how these same agencies create and justify harmful narratives that reinforce such representations.²⁹ A person's moral worth does not depend on her intelligence, and Mary's intelligence or lack of it should be ethically irrelevant; however, because of Miss Brodie's institutional authority and power, Mary's apparent intellectual weaknesses are construed as ethical failings, and she is subsequently placed in narratives that determine and exhaust her character. As an adult, Sandy becomes famous for her book on moral perception, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and the notion of transfiguration is a central theme of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Although "transfiguration" typically has positive spiritual connotations, we can say that Mary is harmfully transfigured by Miss Brodie's power and authority. Miss Brodie too is transfigured. In many ways, she is like other middle-aged and middle-class spinsters in 1930s Edinburgh (42–3), but within her classroom and among her set, she becomes supremely powerful, and her authority is, for much of the novel, almost unquestioned by the members of her set.

By raising the topics of power and authority and in stressing Spark's critique of institutions, I am approaching the novel's more specifically political subjects. These include Miss Brodie's elitism and fascism, Miss Mackay's plots against Miss Brodie, and Sandy's identification with established authority; there are others. These topics are, however, beyond the

scope of this paper. In concluding, I return to the idea of the desegregation of art.

In one of the novel's most famous passages, Jenny, now thirty-nine and married, encounters a man who rekindles her erotic wonder; we read that "the concise happening filled her with astonishment whenever it came to mind in later days, and with a sense of the hidden possibilities in all things" (81). We never learn of the hidden possibilities in Mary, because she is reduced to a stupid, silent, blameable, and, ultimately, dead lump. Spark never really allows us to identify with Mary as a victim, nor does she protest Mary's victimization, at least not in any obvious way. But she is far from ethically neutral on Mary. Spark's ethical goal, I take it, is to lead us to reflect not only on the role that narrative and narration can play in the process of victimization but also on the ways in which we are always involved in such processes. Narratives pervade our lives, as do institutions, and we can fail to question narrative authority, just as we can passively accept dubious characterizations of persons that cast those persons into particular narrative roles. For Spark, the desegregation of art occurs if, after reading *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, we resist the pernicious narratives we encounter in real life, we question the power and authority of those who construct them, and we recognize our own possible complicity with such narratives and the powers responsible for them. Of course, there is no guarantee that readers will do so; however, Spark urges readers to reflect on the ethics of narrative and their own ethical responses to narrative, and since such matters are not confined to the sphere of literature, it is possible that readers will think more cogently about their moral responsibilities in the real world. More positively, Spark, like other moral and ethical writers, desires to illuminate our lives by insisting that we respect persons as ends in themselves; to alter Spark's words slightly, she demands that we recognize the hidden possibilities in all people.³⁰

Notes

1. At the time, Spark's remarks were more controversial than they might seem, since the term "desegregation" had very real racial connotations, especially for her original American audience. Compare her comments to those of Amiri Baraka in "The Revolutionary Theatre," where he claims that it "must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims" (1960).

2. Whiteley offers a valuable discussion of the “dynamics of power and knowledge” in the novel. He and Lodge consider the importance of institutions in the book.
3. Although I do not follow his terminology, I have been deeply influenced Newton.
4. See, for instance, Dorenkamp, Little, Lodge, Paul, and Richmond. Many critics use the term “fiction” rather than “narrative” and argue that Miss Brodie creates fictions. I use the broader term because I believe that Miss Brodie constructs narratives based on false beliefs and that such narratives are not necessarily best understood as fictions. For some discussion of the idea of fiction, see Searle and Currie *Nature*.
5. Bower, Dorenkamp, Holloway, and Lodge discuss the narrative structure of the novel. Virtually all of the critics I’ve read consider the various ethical matters addressed in the book.
6. Currie challenges this claim in regards to film: he argues that many films do not have narrators but do have implied authors. See “Unreliability.”
7. The suggestion that narrators are “functions” is offered by Bal (16). I tend to believe that, depending on the work, it can make sense to speak of the narrator as a function, a character, or even the author.
8. In what follows, I refer to the narrator as “she.” For a good discussion of the narrator, see Murray and Tait.
9. Cheyette, Dorenkamp, Lodge, and Whiteley, for example, refer to the narrator as omniscient.
10. See Lodge for some discussion of the lack of suspense created by the many prolepses. Bridgeman considers the cognitive consequences of prolepsis in Spark’s novel and in other works.
11. For a recent discussion of omniscience, see Culler.
12. Genette’s analysis can be found in *Narrative*, 244–5 and 228–31. I’ve followed Rimmon-Kenan’s explication of these terms in Chapter 7 of her book.
13. The following incidents are related twice in the novel, and there are slight differences in the narration of them: Miss Brodie’s speech in which she claims that she will never teach at a “crank school” (9, 112), the discussion between Sandy and a man who visits her after she has become Sister Helena (34–5, 127–8), and Miss Brodie’s conversation with Sandy about Miss Brodie’s treatment of Mary (60, 77). All of these incidents are

- moments of direct discourse. I've encountered references to such discrepancies in only one critical work, Robb who considers the first referred to in this note (Robb 27–28). He examines the two versions as important for an understanding of Sandy's motives but does not consider how the differences might compromise the narrator's alleged omniscience.
14. Dobie, for instance, agrees with this assessment of Mary: "Unfortunately, Miss Brodie's opinion of Mary Macgregor also proves to be accurate. Miss Brodie describes her as a silent lump, for she is stupid and unfeeling" (224). Is Dobie here confusing the narrator with Miss Brodie?
 15. For some discussion of the difficulties in defining and measuring intelligence, see Gould.
 16. For many literary scholars, Foucault is the theorist who most cogently analyzes the relationships between power and knowledge, and we could analyze the narrative and narrator by drawing on Foucault's notion of power/knowledge. For an overview of Foucault's thought, see *Power/Knowledge*.
 17. The term "master narrative" is taken from Lyotard. Schneider suggests that, in betraying Miss Brodie, Sandy "becomes the heroine of another Brodie story, the plot against her" (429). This is so, but only retroactively.
 18. Bridgeman offers a thoughtful analysis of Spark's use of prolepsis in narrating Mary's death (135–6).
 19. The description of Mary's face here and elsewhere invite a Levinasian reading of the novel.
 20. I owe the last two points in this sentence to the anonymous reviewer for *JNT*.
 21. For some analysis of Mary, see Bower, Bridgeman, Kemp, Murray and Tait, Paul, Richmond, and Whiteley.
 22. See Arendt for some comments. For a more thorough discussion, see Friedlander.
 23. Girard discusses persecution texts in the first three chapters of *The Scapegoat*. See also *Violence*.
 24. O'Neill offers a helpful analysis of what it means to treat persons as ends in themselves in chapters 6 and 7 of *Constructing*.

25. For some discussion of the relationships between narrative and selfhood, see MacIntyre, chapter 15, Taylor, Part 1, and Ricoeur.
26. I must make a caveat here. We cannot treat all persons in this way, since not all persons are mentally capable of being “coauthors” of their own lives. I’m thinking of young children, severely mentally handicapped people, and deeply mentally ill men and women. Obviously, such individuals ought to be treated as ends in themselves, as human beings. My discussion, then, is meant to capture only what it *often* means to treat a person as an end in him or herself.
27. Drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell, Newton offers interesting insights on the ethics of witnessing (66).
28. Randisi gives an overview of Spark as satirist in the first chapter of her book.
29. See note 2 above.
30. I want to thank Dr. Sue Laver and an anonymous reader at *JNT* for their comments on previous drafts of this essay.

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