George Friel, Muriel Spark, and ‘the music of what happens’

By Linden Bicket

It is difficult to resist making comparisons between George Friel’s best-known (yet still critically under-explored) novel, *Mr Alfred M.A.* (1972) and Muriel Spark’s much more famous *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), published eleven years earlier. On the face of it, these two works about teachers and their pupils represent vastly different social and educational experiences. Spark’s elegant novella has as its scholastic setting the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, an establishment based on Spark’s alma mater, the James Gillespie’s High School for Girls, in smart, inter-war Morningside. The Marcia Blaine School, ‘which had been partially endowed in the middle of the nineteenth century by the wealthy widow of an Edinburgh book-binder’, becomes centre stage for the cult of the glamorous, cultured Miss Brodie, leader of the ‘Brodie Set’.[1] Meanwhile, Friel’s novel follows the progress of Mr Alfred, the pitiable, unhappy teacher of children in deprived parts of post-war Glasgow in the 1960s. Gang warfare, urban decline, and social alienation are rife, and all impact on Mr Alfred’s faltering attempts to teach in classrooms that are often vandalised, set on fire, and burgled. Like their literary creations, Spark and Friel too may seem polar opposites. While Spark lived a cosmopolitan life across continents, was internationally famous, and wrote prolifically, Friel remained in and around Glasgow, was felt to be old fashioned, and struggled to find publishers for his work. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was snapped up and published by *The New Yorker*, with Spark becoming one of its ‘darlings’,[2] but Friel’s ‘major professional problem’, as Gordon Jarvie puts it, was that he ‘was never remotely a vogue writer’, and ‘had the greatest trouble getting himself published at all.’[3]

And yet – or to use a Sparkian word, ‘nevertheless’ – these two authors and their novels about teachers share much more in common than we might at first assume. Friel, a teacher of English, was born in a room-and-kitchen tenement flat on Maryhill Road, Glasgow, in 1910. He was one of seven children born to Jimmy

Friell – a native of Donegal – and Sarah Toal.[4] He felt himself to be 'a Glasgow-Irishman'[5] rather than a Scottish writer, and indeed the speech of his characters and the rhythms of his prose mean that he is often compared to Joyce, with critics frequently noting connections between his work and Dubliners.[6] The characters lurking in Friel's tenement closes, beleaguered cafes, and riotous classrooms sing, hum, and shout, and there is a musicality about the seemingly bleak story of Mr Alfred which suggests a bigger cosmic drama of good and evil beneath the 'nonstop rain and low graphite skies' of the 'damp, dismal world'.[7]

The polyphony of voices which score *Mr Alfred M.A.* often increase in volume at moments of crisis. We are told, for instance, that just before a gang smash his aunt's windows, Mr Alfred 'elevated his glass sacramentally and plainchanted'.[8] Outside, a 'merry cry' turns sinister, and there is 'an edge on the antiphonal voices', before the window implodes and Mr Alfred timidly quotes Yeats's 'The Second Coming'.[9] Elsewhere Mrs Provan, the parent of one of Mr Alfred's chief tormentors, 'ended her aria on a high note of horror' as she makes a complaint about Mr Alfred's treatment of her son to the headmaster, Mr Briggs, the tenor to her soprano, who 'continued piano'.[10] Briggs' own musical-sounding interventions in the novel are later described simply as 'Curt. Staccato'.[11] Friel's leitmotifs subtly suggest something of Mr Alfred's loneliness and need for spiritual solace in his unaccompanied 'plainchant'; Mrs Provan's theatricality and her operatic embellishment of the truth in her 'aria'; and Briggs's corresponding inexpressiveness and desire to smooth over potential scandal in his staccato commands. Musical refrains, along with literary and biblical references, are woven carefully throughout the novel and create a sense of discord, or a lack of harmony, which reflect the setting's social dislocation. And this feels filmic – Friel's characters interact with a soundtrack which amplifies their struggle for survival.

Musical refrains are a subtle feature of Spark's novel too, and are often traceable to the pervasive influence of the Brodie Set's charismatic teacher. During a walk to the Old Town led by Miss Brodie, Sandy Stranger imagines the Jacobite hero of Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, Alan Breck, singing 'a ditty' to her, before her stirring daydream takes on the more practical concern of whether they will be 'swept

away into sexual intercourse'.[12] Miss Brodie's spinning of her own fictions (not to mention her romantic involvement with the music teacher, Gordon Lowther) lays the groundwork for Sandy's reverie here. But of course, Lowther is no dazzling Alan Breck. His rendition of Psalm 100 ('All people that on earth do dwell, / Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice') is delivered 'rather slowly and mournfully', and the love-affair between Gordon Lowther and Jean Brodie ultimately comes to nothing.[13] Miss Brodie encourages the appreciation of music, holding a finger up 'with delight' so that her girls can listen to the Latin mistress singing a folksong.[14] She also takes her set to the opera to see *La Traviata* as part of their broad, extra-curricular cultural education, but this trip is questioned by Miss Mackay, the headteacher whom miss Brodie despises, and who becomes a determined inquisitor 'in her efforts to discredit' her.[15]

In fact, Miss Brodie and Mr Alfred each express barely-concealed derision for their superiors, who view their teaching methods with some concern and suspicion. While Miss Brodie observes rather jealously that Miss Mackay is 'younger' than she is, and 'higher salaried', she explains that: 'The best qualifications available at the University in my time were inferior to those open to Miss Mackay. That is why she holds the senior position. But her reasoning power is deficient'.[16] Meanwhile, Mr Alfred thinks bitterly that the Deputy Head Master is 'a teaching machine during school hours', while outside of them he is 'a dunce who had never written a poem in his life', as well as 'a non-smoker and tee totaller who read nothing.'[17] While outwardly so different – Miss Brodie is captivating and flamboyant, and Mr Alfred is shabby and dishevelled – both teachers are fragile, rather narcissistic creatures who cling urgently to notions of their own greatness in the face of more powerful forces. They feel especially buoyed by the cultural capital given to them by knowledge of the arts; for Mr Alfred it is his degree (his 'M.A.') in English Literature that is an abiding solace and source of self-esteem, while her 'prime' is, for Miss Brodie, the foundation of her poise and self-assurance. And yet, both novels propose that human worth cannot be found solely in educational achievement, gracefulness, or refined good taste. In the end, the 'M.A.' and the 'prime' are rather flimsy, cold sources of comfort. Mr Alfred feels ashamed that his degree is an ordinary one, while Miss Brodie, her 'prime' prematurely ended in her mid-fifties, is 'shrivelled and betrayed', a resentful, much diminished, and rather lonely figure.[18]

Nonetheless, both Mr Alfred and Miss Brodie determinedly attempt to pass on their appreciation for the arts during their teaching careers. Both are out of step with modern educational mores. Miss Brodie makes clear her contempt for the Modern, rather than the Classical side of the Senior School, with its emphasis on domestic science, gymnastics and games, and promotes instead a hotchpotch personal curriculum comprised of appreciation for Renaissance art, dance, literature, and a galaxy of heroines including Helen of Troy, Anna Pavlova, Cleopatra and Sybill Thorndike. She enchants her girls with the glamour of holidays abroad, instruction regarding skincare, and reports of an audience with the Pope and a social gathering with A. A. Milne. Her pupils, like Mr Alfred's, are also regularly exposed to poetry. Devotees of romance, both teachers quote Keats' 'To Autumn'[19] in their classrooms, but while Miss Brodie's young audience is receptive for a time (though it must be remembered that Rose 'shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat'), Mr Alfred makes little lasting impression on his pupils.[20] While Miss Brodie is 'full of culture' and is 'an Edinburgh Festival all on her own', Mr Alfred is sure to be regarded, thinks the Deputy Head, as 'a dead loss, a square, a nutter, an oldie.'[21] One of his brighter pupils confirms his ineffectiveness, observing that his teacher uses his superior knowledge of literature, not as a teaching tool, but as a weapon ('He could be very cutting. Then I found out it was Shakespeare or Pope or somebody. How were we to know?').[22]

Notably, another pupil finds Mr Alfred to be 'casting his pearls before swine' (in the formulation of Matthew 7:6), while in Spark's novel, Miss Brodie's pupil Sandy Stranger is often identified by a porcine attribute, her oft-mentioned 'pig-like eyes'.[23] Gerard Carruthers notes that 'Christ's driving out of one or more demons into the Gadarene swine [in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke] confirms a long-standing cultural association between pigs and the Devil'.[24] He suggests that Sandy's later behaviour (in her affair with Sandy Lloyd the art teacher, and subsequent betrayal of Miss Brodie) is 'immoral' and even 'somewhat demonic'.[25] This is a richly suggestive theological reading of the novel, and one that might potentially be extended to *Mr Alfred M.A.* By the end of Friel's text, Mr Alfred has, typically, embarked on an alcoholic pay-day binge, shambling in and out of a number of Glasgow pubs. In the end he is robbed and assaulted by some former pupils, and the narrative swerves drunkenly into what might be

either a concussed delusion, or a genuine encounter with a demonic figure named 'Tod', who intimidates and questions Mr Alfred, and denies that he is God, saying: 'No, the other One. […] The Adversary.'[26] This is a deeply strange chapter of the novel, which might have until this point seemed to function mostly (though not entirely) as straightforward social realism – a catalogue of the distorting effects of poverty, failed ambition, and cruelty in the neglected parts of post-war Glasgow. But there is clearly something more to *Mr Alfred M.A.* than social realism, as there is more to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* than broad comedy and classroom nostalgia. The novel's debt to biblical narrative is clear in its second section, entitled 'The Writing on the Wall', an indication of doom, as seen first in Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5.[27] Mr Alfred's demonic-sounding protégé disrupts the narrative entirely in this portentous section of the novel, and from this point on, Mr Alfred deteriorates, becomes institutionalised, but is, finally, 'glad to be alive'.[28]

Both Spark and Friel were Catholics, and both were alive to the presence of goodness in creation, as well as the potential for evil. Carruthers offers that 'the puniness of Brodie, her "silliness" when compared, implicitly, to the potency of God and his control […] leads to a tender sympathy from Sandy for this "fragile" human creature.'[29] Ultimately I would like to suggest that there is something similar at work in Friel's novel. Both Mr Alfred and Miss Brodie are seen from a compassionate vantage point by their authors. Mr Alfred is flawed and at times repellent (his relationship with his pupil Rose is deeply troubling) but his author manages to find sympathy for him in his smallness, as Spark does for Brodie. Spark's novel is often read as a sustained narrative challenge to Calvinistic notions of a pre-destined human teleology, with Miss Brodie unable to manipulate the fate of her pupils in the way she intends. Perhaps Friel's *Mr Alfred M.A.* issues a similar challenge to a drab secularism that removes the numinous from human life, and resists the sacramental cosmos of Friel's Scottish Catholic spirituality. Friel nods to the disparity between the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh in terms of wealth and health in his novel when he notes that the English psychiatrist, Mr Jubb, author of *Some Common Phobias of Metropolitan Man*, had come north 'in search of material for a supplementary paper', but having found little material in Edinburgh, 'cut west across country to more fertile ground'.[30] Perhaps if Mr Jubb had read Sandy Stranger's 'strange book of

psychology, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace"', he would have noted that Edinburgh is just as fecund a location for psychological and spiritual crisis as Glasgow.[31]

In any case, Friel's novel deserves to be much more widely known. It is a rich brother novel to Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and is considered by a clutch of critics to be 'one of the greatest Scottish novels of the twentieth century', 'a minor classic', and 'Friel's undoubted masterpiece'.[32] It is one Glasgow Irishman's symphony of compassion in the midst of bleak surroundings, detailing 'the music of what happens', in the words of a later and very great Irish poet.[33]

It is difficult to resist making comparisons between George Friel's best-known (yet still critically under-explored) novel, *Mr Alfred M.A.* (1972) and Muriel Spark's much more famous *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), published eleven years earlier. On the face of it, these two works about teachers and their pupils represent vastly different social and educational experiences. Spark's elegant novella has as its scholastic setting the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, an establishment based on Spark's alma mater, the James Gillespie's High School for Girls, in smart, inter-war Morningside. The Marcia Blaine School, 'which had been partially endowed in the middle of the nineteenth century by the wealthy widow of an Edinburgh book-binder', becomes centre stage for the cult of the glamorous, cultured Miss Brodie, leader of the 'Brodie Set'.[34] Meanwhile, Friel's novel follows the progress of Mr Alfred, the pitiable, unhappy teacher of children in deprived parts of post-war Glasgow in the 1960s. Gang warfare, urban decline, and social alienation are rife, and all impact on Mr Alfred's faltering attempts to teach in classrooms that are often vandalised, set on fire, and burgled. Like their literary creations, Spark and Friel too may seem polar opposites. While Spark lived a cosmopolitan life across continents, was internationally famous, and wrote prolifically, Friel remained in and around Glasgow, was felt to be old fashioned, and struggled to find publishers for his work. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was snapped up and published by *The New Yorker*, with Spark becoming one of its 'darlings',[35] but Friel's 'major professional problem', as Gordon Jarvie puts it, was that he 'was never remotely a vogue writer', and 'had the greatest trouble getting himself published at all.'[36]

And yet – or to use a Sparkian word, 'nevertheless' – these two authors and their novels about teachers share much more in common than we might at first assume. Friel, a teacher of English, was born in a room-and-kitchen tenement flat on Maryhill Road, Glasgow, in 1910. He was one of seven children born to Jimmy Friell – a native of Donegal – and Sarah Toal.[37] He felt himself to be 'a Glasgow-Irishman'[38] rather than a Scottish writer, and indeed the speech of his characters and the rhythms of his prose mean that he is often compared to Joyce, with critics frequently noting connections between his work and Dubliners.[39] The characters lurking in Friel's tenement closes, beleaguered cafes, and riotous classrooms sing, hum, and shout, and there is a musicality about the seemingly bleak story of Mr Alfred which suggests a bigger cosmic drama of good and evil beneath the 'nonstop rain and low graphite skies' of the 'damp, dismal world'.[40]

The polyphony of voices which score *Mr Alfred M.A.* often increase in volume at moments of crisis. We are told, for instance, that just before a gang smash his aunt's windows, Mr Alfred 'elevated his glass sacramentally and plainchanted'.[41] Outside, a 'merry cry' turns sinister, and there is 'an edge on the antiphonal voices', before the window implodes and Mr Alfred timidly quotes Yeats's 'The Second Coming'.[42] Elsewhere Mrs Provan, the parent of one of Mr Alfred's chief tormentors, 'ended her aria on a high note of horror' as she makes a complaint about Mr Alfred's treatment of her son to the headmaster, Mr Briggs, the tenor to her soprano, who 'continued piano'.[43] Briggs' own musical-sounding interventions in the novel are later described simply as 'Curt. Staccato'.[44] Friel's leitmotifs subtly suggest something of Mr Alfred's loneliness and need for spiritual solace in his unaccompanied 'plainchant'; Mrs Provan's theatricality and her operatic embellishment of the truth in her 'aria'; and Briggs's corresponding inexpressiveness and desire to smooth over potential scandal in his staccato commands. Musical refrains, along with literary and biblical references, are woven carefully throughout the novel and create a sense of discord, or a lack of harmony, which reflect the setting's social dislocation. And this feels filmic – Friel's characters interact with a soundtrack which amplifies their struggle for survival.

Musical refrains are a subtle feature of Spark's novel too, and are often traceable to the pervasive influence of the Brodie Set's charismatic teacher. During a walk

to the Old Town led by Miss Brodie, Sandy Stranger imagines the Jacobite hero of Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, Alan Breck, singing 'a ditty' to her, before her stirring daydream takes on the more practical concern of whether they will be 'swept away into sexual intercourse'.[45] Miss Brodie's spinning of her own fictions (not to mention her romantic involvement with the music teacher, Gordon Lowther) lays the groundwork for Sandy's reverie here. But of course, Lowther is no dazzling Alan Breck. His rendition of Psalm 100 ('All people that on earth do dwell, / Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice') is delivered 'rather slowly and mournfully', and the love-affair between Gordon Lowther and Jean Brodie ultimately comes to nothing.[46] Miss Brodie encourages the appreciation of music, holding a finger up 'with delight' so that her girls can listen to the Latin mistress singing a folksong.[47] She also takes her set to the opera to see *La Traviata* as part of their broad, extra-curricular cultural education, but this trip is questioned by Miss Mackay, the headteacher whom miss Brodie despises, and who becomes a determined inquisitor 'in her efforts to discredit' her.[48]

In fact, Miss Brodie and Mr Alfred each express barely-concealed derision for their superiors, who view their teaching methods with some concern and suspicion. While Miss Brodie observes rather jealously that Miss Mackay is 'younger' than she is, and 'higher salaried', she explains that: 'The best qualifications available at the University in my time were inferior to those open to Miss Mackay. That is why she holds the senior position. But her reasoning power is deficient'.[49] Meanwhile, Mr Alfred thinks bitterly that the Deputy Head Master is 'a teaching machine during school hours', while outside of them he is 'a dunce who had never written a poem in his life', as well as 'a non-smoker and tee totaller who read nothing.'[50] While outwardly so different – Miss Brodie is captivating and flamboyant, and Mr Alfred is shabby and dishevelled – both teachers are fragile, rather narcissistic creatures who cling urgently to notions of their own greatness in the face of more powerful forces. They feel especially buoyed by the cultural capital given to them by knowledge of the arts; for Mr Alfred it is his degree (his 'M.A.') in English Literature that is an abiding solace and source of self-esteem, while her 'prime' is, for Miss Brodie, the foundation of her poise and self-assurance. And yet, both novels propose that human worth cannot be found solely in educational achievement, gracefulness, or refined good taste. In the end, the 'M.A.' and the 'prime' are rather flimsy, cold sources of

comfort. Mr Alfred feels ashamed that his degree is an ordinary one, while Miss Brodie, her 'prime' prematurely ended in her mid-fifties, is 'shrivelled and betrayed', a resentful, much diminished, and rather lonely figure.[51]

Nonetheless, both Mr Alfred and Miss Brodie determinedly attempt to pass on their appreciation for the arts during their teaching careers. Both are out of step with modern educational mores. Miss Brodie makes clear her contempt for the Modern, rather than the Classical side of the Senior School, with its emphasis on domestic science, gymnastics and games, and promotes instead a hotchpotch personal curriculum comprised of appreciation for Renaissance art, dance, literature, and a galaxy of heroines including Helen of Troy, Anna Pavlova, Cleopatra and Sybill Thorndike. She enchants her girls with the glamour of holidays abroad, instruction regarding skincare, and reports of an audience with the Pope and a social gathering with A. A. Milne. Her pupils, like Mr Alfred's, are also regularly exposed to poetry. Devotees of romance, both teachers quote Keats' 'To Autumn'[52] in their classrooms, but while Miss Brodie's young audience is receptive for a time (though it must be remembered that Rose 'shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat'), Mr Alfred makes little lasting impression on his pupils.[53] While Miss Brodie is 'full of culture' and is 'an Edinburgh Festival all on her own', Mr Alfred is sure to be regarded, thinks the Deputy Head, as 'a dead loss, a square, a nutter, an oldie.'[54] One of his brighter pupils confirms his ineffectiveness, observing that his teacher uses his superior knowledge of literature, not as a teaching tool, but as a weapon ('He could be very cutting. Then I found out it was Shakespeare or Pope or somebody. How were we to know?').[55]

Notably, another pupil finds Mr Alfred to be 'casting his pearls before swine' (in the formulation of Matthew 7:6), while in Spark's novel, Miss Brodie's pupil Sandy Stranger is often identified by a porcine attribute, her oft-mentioned 'pig-like eyes'.[56] Gerard Carruthers notes that 'Christ's driving out of one or more demons into the Gadarene swine [in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke] confirms a long-standing cultural association between pigs and the Devil'.[57] He suggests that Sandy's later behaviour (in her affair with Sandy Lloyd the art teacher, and subsequent betrayal of Miss Brodie) is 'immoral' and even 'somewhat demonic'.[58] This is a richly suggestive theological reading of the novel,

and one that might potentially be extended to *Mr Alfred M.A.* By the end of Friel's text, Mr Alfred has, typically, embarked on an alcoholic pay-day binge, shambling in and out of a number of Glasgow pubs. In the end he is robbed and assaulted by some former pupils, and the narrative swerves drunkenly into what might be either a concussed delusion, or a genuine encounter with a demonic figure named 'Tod', who intimidates and questions Mr Alfred, and denies that he is God, saying: 'No, the other One. […] The Adversary.'[59] This is a deeply strange chapter of the novel, which might have until this point seemed to function mostly (though not entirely) as straightforward social realism – a catalogue of the distorting effects of poverty, failed ambition, and cruelty in the neglected parts of post-war Glasgow. But there is clearly something more to *Mr Alfred M.A.* than social realism, as there is more to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* than broad comedy and classroom nostalgia. The novel's debt to biblical narrative is clear in its second section, entitled 'The Writing on the Wall', an indication of doom, as seen first in Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5.[60] Mr Alfred's demonic-sounding protégé disrupts the narrative entirely in this portentous section of the novel, and from this point on, Mr Alfred deteriorates, becomes institutionalised, but is, finally, 'glad to be alive'.[61]

Both Spark and Friel were Catholics, and both were alive to the presence of goodness in creation, as well as the potential for evil. Carruthers offers that 'the puniness of Brodie, her "silliness" when compared, implicitly, to the potency of God and his control […] leads to a tender sympathy from Sandy for this "fragile" human creature.'[62] Ultimately I would like to suggest that there is something similar at work in Friel's novel. Both Mr Alfred and Miss Brodie are seen from a compassionate vantage point by their authors. Mr Alfred is flawed and at times repellent (his relationship with his pupil Rose is deeply troubling) but his author manages to find sympathy for him in his smallness, as Spark does for Brodie. Spark's novel is often read as a sustained narrative challenge to Calvinistic notions of a pre-destined human teleology, with Miss Brodie unable to manipulate the fate of her pupils in the way she intends. Perhaps Friel's *Mr Alfred M.A.* issues a similar challenge to a drab secularism that removes the numinous from human life, and resists the sacramental cosmos of Friel's Scottish Catholic spirituality. Friel nods to the disparity between the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh in terms of wealth and health in his novel when he notes that the English psychiatrist, Mr Jubb, author of *Some Common Phobias of Metropolitan*

Man, had come north ‘in search of material for a supplementary paper’, but having found little material in Edinburgh, ‘cut west across country to more fertile ground’.[63] Perhaps if Mr Jubb had read Sandy Stranger’s ‘strange book of psychology, “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace”’, he would have noted that Edinburgh is just as fecund a location for psychological and spiritual crisis as Glasgow.[64]

In any case, Friel’s novel deserves to be much more widely known. It is a rich brother novel to Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and is considered by a clutch of critics to be ‘one of the greatest Scottish novels of the twentieth century’, ‘a minor classic’, and ‘Friel’s undoubted masterpiece’.[65] It is one Glasgow Irishman’s symphony of compassion in the midst of bleak surroundings, detailing ‘the music of what happens’, in the words of a later and very great Irish poet.[66]

(c) The Bottle Imp