

All the Abbess's Nuns:

Muriel Spark and the Idioms of Watergate

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Is *Animal Farm* a story about livestock management? Is *Gulliver's Travels* an exploration of body size in different populations across the globe? Only by the same token is Muriel Spark's *The Abbess of Crewe* a Catholic novelist's enquiry into the hierarchy and operations of a nunnery. The affinities with *Gulliver's Travels* and *Animal Farm* are, however, very close. *The Abbess of Crewe*, like *Animal Farm* and *Gulliver's Travels*, involves the satirical displacement of well-known political referents from their native heath to an unfamiliar location. Where Swift satirised post-Reformation politics and the disputes of Whigs and Tories in the settings of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, and Orwell the rise of Communism and the Russian Revolution in the porcine takeover of Manor Farm, so Spark transplanted the unfolding Watergate scandal, from Washington D.C. to a Benedictine nunnery in the English Midlands. The immediate effect of the contrast is both deflationary and rich in comic absurdity. What comes clearly into focus is the farcical fumbling of Nixon and his aides. Spark pricks the pompous punditry and hyperbolic media exaggeration surrounding the Watergate affair, and brings a dose of bathos to the tragic fall of a President. Here Spark follows the similar satiric strategies of Swift and Orwell, employing mock heroic allegories of reduction. Nevertheless, unlike the efforts of Swift and Orwell, whose interest, respectively, in body size and livestock farming, were somewhat limited, Spark, a Roman Catholic convert and self-declared Catholic novelist, leaves open the tantalising possibility that *The Abbess of Crewe* contains a richer seam of commentary on the ostensible matter in hand than the comedy of juxtaposition and comparison. Is the story of the Abbess and her nunnery about more than preposterous parallels and ridiculous comparisons? Is it, in some measure, a Catholic novel after all?

Spark's idea for a Watergate parable came to her when reading a story about Watergate in a Ceylonese newspaper when visiting the newly renamed Sri Lanka in November 1973. Watergate was not the lead item in the Sri Lankan press, but a tiny below-the-fold paragraph. That, she said later to a *Guardian* interviewer, put Watergate in perspective. It clarified matters for her, which she now saw for the first time in due proportion.¹ Certain remarks in *The Abbess of Crewe* suggest that Spark saw the mundane farce behind the high-flown constitutional issues: 'Such a scandal could never arise in the United States of America. They have a sense of proportion and they understand human nature over there; it's the secret of their success. A realistic race, even if they do eat asparagus the wrong way.'² In her following novel, *The Takeover*, published in 1976, but set in the disordered Italy of 1973-5, a character relaxes with 'a couple of tranquillizers' and a pile of newspapers and magazines, as he manages to 'hypnotize himself with the current American government scandals of which everyone's latent anarchism drank deep that summer.'³ There was nothing edifying about the popular clamour surrounding the Watergate affair, just as there was nothing inherently tragic about

¹ Interview, *Guardian*, 8 Nov. 1974, p. 10.

² Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974: New York, 1995), p. 19.

³ Muriel Spark, *The Takeover* (1976: Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 54.

the fate of the far-from-Hamlet-like, clumsy Malvolio in the White House. Spark took everybody involved in Watergate down a peg or two.

However, an episode that is all bathos and bungling would not be worthy of sustained allegorical treatment, even at the length of a novella. More is going on here, more is at stake, than Spark's sense that the excessive fanfare surrounding Watergate ought to be downplayed. It is very hard to believe that the entire inspiration behind Spark's intricate plot was negative, simply one of noise abatement. In a contemporary interview with Radio 4's Kaleidoscope on the book's publication, Spark revealed that she 'thought the whole Watergate thing was greatly exaggerated. I didn't want to do a direct satire on Nixon and I haven't done that.'⁴ But what exactly? For all that Spark's declared aim was to diminish Watergate as it was presented by a febrile, hyperbolizing media, the lineaments of Watergate obtrusively dominate the plot of *The Abbess of Crewe*.

Although a satirist of sublime gifts, Spark is not immediately thought of as a political writer or as an observer of America and its institutions. Why Watergate? At one level, of course, the answer is obvious. If no educated middle-class person, anywhere on the globe, at the time of Spark's centenary in 2018 could get through a day without seeing some article about President Trump on their computers or smartphones, so no educated person in the years 1973 and 1974 could get through a day without seeing Watergate unfold in their newspapers or television screen. For Watergate was the great scandal of the analogue era, and the daily televised deliberations of the Senate Watergate Committee became a fix for many viewers.

The Watergate scandal and its investigation made household names of several figures from the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern class of American politics - backroom advisers, political aides of various kinds, judges and prosecutors, reporters and editors, including, far-from-exhaustively, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, Colson, Butterfield, Liddy and Hunt, Judge Sirica, Cox, Jaworski, Woodward and Bernstein, Ben Bradlee. A useful index of celebrity: the *Washington Post* reporter Carl Bernstein who did so much to uncover the scandal was portrayed on screen by both Dustin Hoffman (in *All the President's Men*) and Jack Nicholson (in *Heartburn*). Indeed, Watergate's impact on the wider culture was significant and enduring. Just as the idioms of Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible are ubiquitous in the English we speak, so the idioms of Watergate became fixtures in journalese from the mid-1970s onwards. Most obviously, the addition of the mischievous suffix '-gate' became the standard way of designating any political scandal or even minor shenanigans, and not only in the United States. Moreover, several memorable expressions entered the language - 'third-rate burglary', 'cancer on the presidency', 'Deep Throat', 'expletive deleted', 'smoking gun', 'Saturday Night Massacre', the 'inoperative' statement, and the 'long national nightmare'. The idioms of Watergate have become clichés, though for Spark, writing *The Abbess of Crewe* as the scandal entered its final days, they remained fresh, and, along with a casuistical Nixonspeak, constitute a central strand of her novella. For her subject is as much about language and modes of communication as it is about the abuses of authority (something about which Spark is pointedly ambivalent).

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Watergate is the name of a hotel, office and apartment complex at Foggy Bottom in Washington D.C. Here the Democratic National Committee had its headquarters. On the night of 17

⁴ 'Bugs and Mybug', *Listener*, 28 Nov. 1974, p. 706.

June 1972 five burglars were arrested trying to plant a bugging device on the Democrats.⁵ Those arrested were four anti-Castro Cubans and James McCord, an ex-CIA man who was an electronics expert working with Nixon's campaign, unhappily known by its acronym CRP (pronounced CREEP), the Committee to Re-elect the President. The burglars were being run by two underlings, Gordon Liddy at CREEP, and Howard Hunt, another former CIA man who acted as a White House consultant. Evidence soon linked both Liddy and Hunt, and thus both the campaign and the White House, to the burglary. However, at first it seemed that Liddy and Hunt had been moonlighting, and that higher ups were not implicated in the scandal.

Nixon was fighting a re-election campaign in 1972, and the immediate response of the White House to the break-in was political, the need for containment of the episode lest it contaminate Nixon's campaign. There was, however, also a further concern. A wider investigation might uncover other dirty tricks and illegal actions performed by Nixon's irregulars, known as the Plumbers, as they had originally been used to plug leaks from the administration. This was because Nixon and his National Security Adviser, the German-born Henry Kissinger, had been engaged in a dramatic set of openings to both Mao's China and the Soviet Union, intricate and sensitive manoeuvres which were highly secret, even within the administration, with both the Pentagon and the State Department deliberately kept out of the loop. Kissinger would eventually hold the National Security Adviser's role in tandem with the role of Secretary of State, and won global fame in 1973 for his jetsetting efforts to reconcile the superpowers as well as for his shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East. The Abbess's long-distance telephone conversations with the disembodied, guttural and German-accented voice of the globetrotting missionary Sister Gertrude provides a comic chorus on events at the Abbey, and a familiar and amusing echo of Kissinger's immense vanity and grandiosity.

Watergate is in fact a collective name for a whole trail of monkey business, misdemeanours and outright crimes, as well as attempts to cover them all up. As the Watergate scandal later revealed, Nixon's dirty tricks during the primary season had been designed to undermine the candidacies of credible Democrat opponents. The break-ins and bugging of the Democratic headquarters at Watergate gave the scandal its name, but beneath the distracting pranks and skulduggery of the President's men, the ultimate offence of the catalogue of chicanery known collectively under the synecdoche 'Watergate', was this interference with the electoral process. A Republican should not be able to select the Democrat opponent he would prefer to run against.

However, to begin with Watergate unfolded – at least in its public aspect, beyond the hidden work of the prosecutors and other investigators – very slowly and tentatively. Campaign contributions were diverted to pay off the burglars and their minders, as a means of sweetening their silence. Watergate did nothing whatsoever during 1972 to dent Nixon's electoral popularity. Containment worked, up to a point. Nixon achieved a landslide victory in the presidential election in November, nearly six months after the botched burglary. Notwithstanding what were then easily dismissed as the off-piste capers of insubordinate and free-lancing underlings, Nixon won forty-nine states in the electoral college, losing only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia to his Democratic challenger, the ultra-liberal Senator George McGovern.

Nevertheless, soon after Nixon's re-election, the strategy of containment burst at the seams. Although the burglars were found guilty at the conclusion of their trial in January 1973, the presiding judge at the trial of the burglars, John Sirica, was not convinced that the whole story had come out.

⁵ Amidst a huge literature on Watergate – much of it partial and much written by the protagonists themselves – there are some comprehensive surveys, including Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (1990: New York, 1992); Fred Emery, *Watergate: The Corruption and Fall of Richard Nixon* (1994: London, 1995).

James McCord, the convicted electronics expert, wrote to Judge Sirica, admitting that his testimony was perjured under compulsion, and that higher-ups in the Nixon regime had known what was afoot. Nixon's White House legal counsel John Dean, to whom the cover-up had been entrusted, anticipated where the investigation was heading, and seized the opportunity to barter with the prosecutors, hoping to win a lighter sentence for himself by implicating the President in the cover-up. As the scandal engulfed his Presidency, Nixon was forced to part with some of his senior advisers, including his chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman and his principal counsellor on domestic affairs, John Ehrlichman, as well as the turncoat Dean. It was now Dean's story against the President's denials, but with seemingly no way of deciding the issue. Then in the summer of 1973 a minor functionary in the White House Alexander Butterfield, revealed to prosecutors that Nixon had installed recording equipment in his office, and that all of his meetings there had been taped.

A special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, who had been appointed at arm's length from the Justice department, lest the executive branch be seen to be investigating itself, now challenged the President for the relevant tapes. Nixon attempted various ploys to avoid giving Cox the tapes, and eventually had him sacked in the famous Saturday Night Massacre of October 1973, a month before Spark was inspired to begin her novella. In the ensuing furore, Nixon was forced to appoint a successor to Cox, Leon Jaworski, who continued the investigation and the quest for the tapes. Nixon eventually released edited transcripts of the tapes, notoriously with 'expletives deleted'. However, this was insufficient. Eventually, in the summer of 1974, Jaworski won a decisive Supreme Court case forcing Nixon to disgorge relevant tapes. These included a 'smoking gun' tape which showed Nixon at an early stage in the cover-up conspiring to use national security to frustrate the investigation of the burglary. At this point Spark's novel was in press, and it was published in the months following Nixon's resignation, and subsequent pardon by his successor President Gerald Ford. Spark did not know the eventual outcome of the Watergate affair, but she could see that it had jeopardised Nixon's presidency; something that was evident by late 1973 when she embarked upon *The Abbess of Crewe*.

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Spark cleverly transposes the Watergate affair - or at least the events of 1972-3 - to the setting of the Abbey. Spark's initial inspiration for the novella came to her in November 1973, in the month after the Saturday Night Massacre in the Justice Department, and she was still adding significant material as late as May 1974, when the House Judiciary Committee began hearings preliminary to an impeachment motion. The memorable detail, near the beginning of the story, that even the row of poplars in the Abbey grounds was bugged, came to Spark as a result of a dinner party in Rome Spark hosted in honour of her publisher, the former Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, on 12 May 1974. Spark asked Macmillan if he had ever bugged anyone. He replied with circumspection to the effect that at least he had never been 'such a damn fool as to bug myself.' Macmillan then proffered an arresting anecdote: when he had met the Soviet leader Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959, they walked in the garden to evade KGB eavesdroppers, though Macmillan suspected that there were microphones in the trees.⁶ The memorable conceit of the 'secret police of poplars'⁷ at the opening of the novella and the information that the trees were indeed bugged emerged from the dinner party in mid-May. However, publication in the autumn of 1974 suggests that Nixon's resignation in August of that year came too late for the novelist to include in her allegorical whimsy, though by the early summer Nixon already seemed doomed, politically, one way

⁶ D.R. Thorpe, *Supermac: the life of Harold Macmillan* (London, 2010), p. 426; Stannard, Spark, p. 402.

⁷ Spark, *Abbess*, p. 7.

or the other, though whether he would be impeached, or would be forced to resign, or indeed be prosecuted in the criminal courts, was unknown to Spark.

The humour lies primarily in the ingenious parallels Spark concocts between the Abbess's entourage and President Nixon's, between the activities of the Abbess's nuns and those of the President's men. The two contenders to succeed the dying Abbess Hildegard at the nunnery, the conservative Alexandra and the ultra-liberal Sister Felicity represent Nixon and his Democrat opponent, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. Felicity's message of free love, which appeals to some of the younger nuns, is pitched as a version of McGovern's appeal to America's student protesters and anti-Vietnam War counter-culture. As in real life the eventual election was never in doubt, and resulted in the expected landslide for the conservative candidate.

The dramatis personae of the Watergate scandal have their appropriate counterparts in *The Abbess of Crewe*. Nixon's two principal advisers, his chief of staff H.R. 'Bob' Haldeman, and his chief counsellor for domestic affairs, John Ehrlichman, appear in Spark's novella as, respectively, the Prioress Walburga and Mildred, the Novice Mother. John Dean, the White House counsel, who was set up as the fall guy for Watergate but who eventually ratted (truthfully) on his superiors, is captured in the role of Sister Winifrede: 'the scandal stops at Winifrede.'⁸ George Liddy and Howard Hunt, who were the immediate begetters of the Watergate burglary and stationed across the road from the Watergate in a room at a Howard Johnson's motor lodge, are depicted as the Jesuits, Father Baudouin and Father Maximilian. The Cubans they hired to carry out the burglary appear in Spark's allegory as the novice Jesuits, Gregory and Ambrose.

The events of Watergate too have their faithful correspondences in the novella. The work of the Plumbers unit is all too obviously depicted in the training which the nuns at Crewe receive in electronics. The break-in and bugging of the Watergate are allegorised in the theft of Sister Felicity's silver thimble and then the return job to get Sister Felicity's love letters out of the secret drawer in her sewing basket. The Watergate cover-up and the payments out of CRP campaign funds to Hunt and the burglars are satirised in Alexandra's doctoring of the tape recordings of conversations in the nunnery and in the attempts of the dismissed Jesuit novices, who had been commissioned to break in to the sewing room and who burgled Sister Felicity's silver thimble, to blackmail the Abbess's co-conspirators.

There are also miscellaneous allusions to Watergate matters which would have been obvious to the readers of 1974, but are perhaps now more recondite. We learn, for instance, that Sister Felicity is seeing a psychiatrist,⁹ and here her character (which is, to some extent, the archetypal liberal) represents not McGovern but Daniel Ellsberg, the consultant who had leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press, and whose psychiatrist's office, as it emerged during Watergate, Nixon's aides had raided in an attempt to find material with which they could smear the whistleblower. Similarly, Nixon's constitutional argument for not disgorging the tapes, the Executive Privilege enjoyed by the Presidency which protects confidential conversations between a President and his advisers, surfaces in Alexandra's defence of her own position: 'I won't part with the tapes. I claim the ancient Benefit of Clerks. The confidentiality between the nuns and the Abbess cannot be disrupted.'¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

The funniest passages are those which capture telephone conversations between Alexandra and the Kissinger character, the globetrotting ecumenical missionary with the deep Germanic voice,¹¹ Sister Gertrude. She is clever, a philosopher manquée who is compared, in a pejorative backhanded compliment, with her totalizing philosophical 'compatriot',¹² Hegel. Gertrude is an accommodationist with vaingloriously global horizons, a jest perhaps at the expense of Kissinger's celebrated jetsetting, so routinized in fact that it became known as shuttle diplomacy. However, Gertrude's preposterous syncretism is also the reductio ad absurdum of Jesuit attempts to accommodate cultural variations, to the core truths of Christianity, at least on matters of supposed indifference. Indeed, Gertrude seems to subscribe to the universal reconciliation and concordance of all religions, under the auspices of a very notional, indeed loosely heretical, Roman Catholicism.

Gertrude supplies an intermittent comic chorus. She reports in, variously, to the order's headquarters at Crewe, from the Congo from the Andes, from the Himalayas, from Iceland. From the Congo we learn that Gertrude is 'reconciling witch doctors' rituals with a specially adapted rite of the Mass'.¹³ Gertrude preaches in favour of birth control in the Himalayas,¹⁴ where she also intervenes in a dispute between two sects 'on a point of doctrine which apparently has arisen from a mere spelling mistake in English.'¹⁵

In the case of the jokes about Gertrude's planet-wide missionary efforts a decidedly Gulliverian seam is evident in the complex layering of the novel. There are evocations of *Gulliver's Travels*, and perhaps even a very particular allusion to Voltaire's intercontinental anti-Catholic satire *Candide*, in which he describes a tribe of fastidious Amerindian cannibals who eat only Jesuits.¹⁶ Gertrude at the end of a phone line in the Andes describes how she is 'at a very delicate point' in her 'negotiations between the cannibal tribe and that vegetarian sect on the other side of the mountain.'¹⁷ Kissinger-like, Gertrude has fashioned a solution which will accommodate these culturally disparate Andean converts: 'The cannibals are to be converted to the faith with dietary concessions and the excessive zeal of the vegetarian heretics suppressed.'¹⁸ Alexandra wonders how the cannibals 'will fare on the Day of Judgment'.¹⁹ Who shall then arise the eaters or the eaten? Later, we learn that 'the vegetarian tribes have guaranteed to annihilate the cannibals, should they display any desire to roast' Gertrude.²⁰

Kissinger's foreign policy achievements on behalf of Nixon, his opening to China, détente with the Soviet Union, protracted negotiations over Vietnam and the Arab-Israeli conflict, were, politically - (though not legally or constitutionally) - Nixon's best claim to retain office in the face of possible impeachment proceedings. In *The Abbess of Crewe*, Sister Gertrude's 'magnificent work abroad' which 'had earned universal gratitude' becomes the Abbess's best defence against her critics.²¹

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶ Voltaire, *Candide* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 16.

¹⁷ Spark, *Abbess*, p. 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

²¹ Ibid., p. 103.

However, there is more - much more - to *The Abbess of Crewe* than a spoof on the characters and episodes of the Watergate scandal. There are, it seems, layers of meaning here beyond that of the allegory itself. However, Spark goes further than mirroring the characters and deeds of Watergate in the nunnery's cast and their preposterously cynical, undignified and un-nun-like actions. Indeed, one of Spark's primary concerns is with the idioms of Watergate. Spark is entranced by the political argot - simultaneously cynical and pompous - of the President and his aides. This is a book with language at its core. Most obviously, Spark makes play with Nixonese. When on 30 April 1973 Nixon was forced to sacrifice Haldeman and Ehrlichman, he described them in a televised address as 'two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know'. This finds its echo in *The Abbess of Crewe*, when Alexandra describes Walburga and Mildred as "'two of the finest nuns I have ever had the privilege to know.'"²²

At a deeper level Spark explores the languages of dissimulation and evasion, which are part of the professional deformation of character associated with politicians, but not only politicians. For Roman Catholic priests - Jesuits in particular - had also been traditionally associated with a certain economising with the truth. In *The Abbess of Crewe* Spark deploys Alexandra and her co-conspirators as mouthpieces for discourses of indulgence, self-exculpation, apologia, and casuistry: 'The more truths and confusions the better.'²³ This is something for which the Jesuits were particularly notorious in anti-Catholic polemic. Why, the reader wonders, is the convent a hybrid institution, quasi-Benedictine, quasi-Jesuit? The most plausible answer is that it gives Spark licence to make sport of Jesuit casuistry, or more precisely to use the Jesuits as cover for an exploration of the stratagems of exculpation.

Rhetoric, scenarios and poetry are essential elements in Spark's story. Indeed, without these features, the allegory itself is, however congruent with the affairs of Watergate, somewhat thin gruel for the reader. Weightier matter comes in the form of the arguments used by Alexandra to justify herself. Alexandra notes that 'there is one particular tape in which I prove my innocence of the bugging itself.'²⁴ Nixon indeed resorted to such devious ploys on the tapes; knowing that he was being taped, as his interlocutors, on the whole did not, he could choreograph conversations to project his blamelessness (forgetting, of course, that there were other times when he forgot that he was on tape and unwittingly incriminated himself). The Abbess says at one point, in pure Nixonese, 'The more money they demand the less I like it,' then segues cleverly into innocence, for the tapes: 'Actually, I heard about these demands for the first time this morning.'²⁵ There is a marvellous casuistry in the Abbess's argument that 'electronic surveillance', far from being prohibited by the traditional monastic rule, is in effect positively encouraged by it, for it 'does not differ from any other type of watchfulness.'²⁶ The Abbess Alexandra encourages her senior nuns to pay off blackmailers and confuse those authorities, temporal and ecclesiastical, investigating the nunnery, all the while slyly distancing herself, as Nixon did, from the particulars of the cover-up: 'plainly I can take no personal party in what you have in mind.'²⁷ 'I must remain,' she insists, 'in the region of

²² Ibid., p. 92.

²³ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 96

²⁵ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

unknowing.²⁸ The bishops who come to investigate the Abbey leave 'with soothed feelings', though also 'a curious sense of being unable to recall precisely what explanation Alexandra had given.'²⁹

Alexandra says of Gertrude that 'she fits the rhetoric of the occasion'.³⁰ The 'rhetoric of the occasion' is cleverly aped; but to ulterior ends. Sister Gertrude, based on the power-worshipping Kissinger, proclaims at one point that 'a rebellion against a tyrant is only immoral when it hasn't got a chance.'³¹ Gertrude advises Alexandra to consult Machiavelli – 'a great master, but don't quote me as saying so; the name is inexpedient.'³²

At one point Sister Winifrede asks Alexandra 'What are scenarios?' 'They are an art-form,' replies Alexandra, 'based on facts.' She then proceeds to classify casuistical scenarios: 'A good scenario is a garble. A bad one is a bungle. They need not be plausible, only hypnotic, like all good art.'³³ Alexandra is obsessed with 'scenarios'; what they are, their significance, above all their aesthetic qualities. This brings us to the very nub of the book. Arguably, Spark's real subject is style.

This is a novella about aesthetics, a dimension of life which seems to have mattered little to Nixon, Kissinger and their hardboiled associates. Indeed, deliberately, it seems, the Watergate parallels are far from complete in Spark's story. There is a major divergence between the two stories. Nixon and Alexandra share a certain cack-handed ruthlessness, but here the parallels stop. Abbess Alexandra is not a copy of Nixon; if anything, she is Nixon turned-inside-out. Nixon was a self-made man from a poor background whose career was propelled in good part by his resentment of the good fortune, easy manner and seductive style of the various elites he had encountered, whether at Whittier College in California or later in fierce political competition with the Kennedy dynasty. Abbess Alexandra is an anti-Nixon, embodying precisely the aristocratic pedigree, discrimination, aesthetic sense, swank and swagger which he lacked and so detested. According to John Updike's contemporary review of the novella, Alexandra is 'the very opposite of Nixon, a print from the negative.' Alexandra's confident hauteur is a world away from Nixon's 'painfully self-conscious' attempts at human contact, for the Watergate tapes revealed to Updike the President's inability to hit the right note in human relationships, his alighting on mere 'toadying' when trying to establish 'fellowship' with even his 'inner circle'.³⁴ The novella is certainly replete with anti-bourgeois sentiment. Who are we meant to side with, the free-loving bourgeois liberal Felicity, with her renegade Jesuit lover, or the aristocratic, Machiavellian Abbess? Certainly, Spark tends to view the action, albeit by way of an impersonal narrator, through the eyes of Alexandra and her lieutenants. And should we even begin to contemplate fictional words in terms of moral categories? Who among us is fit to judge between the good and the reprobate? 'We are corrupt by our nature in the Fall of Man', Alexandra proclaims.³⁵

Alexandra is a charismatic leader of a sort Nixon could never aspire to be; her effect is 'mesmeric rather than satiric', as Ruth Whittaker notes.³⁶ It is unclear whether Spark appreciated Nixon's dark grudges and decided to give him a comic makeover, transforming the President into an

²⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-8.

³¹ Ibid., p. 43.

³² Ibid., p. 44.

³³ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁴ John Updike, 'Topnotch witcheries', *New Yorker*, 6 Jan. 1975, reprinted in Updike, *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (1983: Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 341-50, at pp. 344-5.

³⁵ Spark, *Abbess*, p. 48.

³⁶ Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London, 1982), p. 103.

obtrusively anti-Nixonian character. However, Alexandra is much more than a Swiftian disfigurement of Nixon. The parallels here are not simply with the world of Watergate, but with enduring themes in Spark's own fictional world. It seems just as likely that Spark was, with typical autobiographical swish, recreating yet another wilful, qualm-free, stylish, formidable and capricious woman in the Brodie mould. After all, there are other close resemblances. This story too concerns a female ensemble in an institutional setting presided over by an arbitrary and despotic queen bee. Indeed, Spark's oeuvre contains several arbitrary, goddess-like creators and manipulators, who make others dance to their sly, willed choreographies. There is, for example, the phony psychologist in *Aiding and Abetting* who makes sport with the two self-confessed Lord Lucans who come to her practice needing counselling;³⁷ or the cunning and ingenious Fleur Talbot of *Loitering with Intent*.³⁸ The Abbess Alexandra is similarly blessed with smeddum and devilment. Indeed, as Whittaker suggests, she is a most unusual fictional character who seems almost to chafe against the confines of the plot.³⁹ Alternatively, Allan Massie sees the darker side – theologically inflected – of a stream of such characters who parade through Spark's oeuvre, exhibiting a wilful solipsism, which insists on remaking the world to suit their own egoism and vanity. No modern novelists, Massie notes, is so alert to evil and the many 'deceptively attractive guises' it is capable of assuming.⁴⁰

Alexandra is a seeming bundle of contradictions. She is a traditionalist, but she encourages the nuns to educate themselves in electronic eavesdropping techniques. She despises Sister Felicity's liberal notions, describing Felicity's religion as 'morbid', a species of 'sentimental Jesusism'.⁴¹ (Is Alexandra here, one wonders, acting as Spark's alter ego, articulating the novelist's own firmly held conception of what Catholicism was, and what it was - very decidedly - not?) Moreover, Alexandra herself, heretically, blasphemously indeed, prefers the diction and rhythms of English poetry to the sacred words of the nunnery's religious services.

Poetry is Alexandra's private vice, Nixon's venial sin was swearing of a fairly mild sort. Indeed, 'Expletives deleted' on his selected transcripts of the tapes suggested that the cussing was saltier than it was in fact. At the conclusion of the novella Alexandra asks her aides to mark 'Poetry deleted' on the transcripts of her recordings.⁴² But how are we to read Alexandra's love of secular poetry, a profane idiom which she prefers to the sacred liturgy?

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The Abbess of Crewe is a flawed jewel. There are undoubted blemishes, and some of the jokes are heavy-handed. The pet food fed to the rank-and-file nuns. The pay-offs in drag to the blackmailers in public lavatories. On the other hand, there are almost certainly cryptic jokes, largely inaccessible to American readers and connoisseurs of Watergate, concealed in plain view at the heart of the story.⁴³ Moreover, where does Spark take her allegory? Unlike *Animal Farm*, *The Abbess of Crewe* does not yield a deeper insight into the political process. The events just happen, with characteristic Sparkian arbitrariness. Of course, this in itself presents a puzzle. Is Spark here, as ever,

³⁷ Muriel Spark, *Aiding and Abetting* (2000: London, 2001).

³⁸ Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (1981: London, 2007).

³⁹ Whittaker, *Faith and Fiction*, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Allan Massie, 'Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark', in Alan Bold (ed.), *Muriel Spark: an Odd Capacity for Vision* (London and Totowa, NJ, 1984), esp. pp. 99-101, 107.

⁴¹ Spark, *Abbess*, p. 49.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴³ Why Crewe? Why Alexandra? Crewe Alexandra?

portraying the unknowable – the undecodable, unpredictable operations of divine providence? Or is it, less charitably, evidence that Spark, unlike Orwell, lacked a profound understanding of politics?⁴⁴

There is no apparent insight into what is being satirised. But is this the wilful obtuseness of the Catholic novelist who views all political machinations, all terrestrial affairs in the light of the eternal? Spark herself attributed her reckless satirical outlook to her grounding in her new-found Catholic faith.⁴⁵ Why, she seems to ask, should the Catholic novelist read the hearts of men? Rather, all too often in Spark's novels, providence simply and arbitrarily disposes. By contrast, realism, context and explanation verge on extenuation, and are appropriate to the secularizing late Protestant or post-Protestant novel, but have no place, as Spark sees it, in her fictions. Is *The Abbess of Crewe* then a Catholic novel *faute de mieux*? Neither of her supporters, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, was a conventional Catholic novelist. Heresies abound in the twentieth-century Catholic novel, and Spark's own Catholic plotting was of a similar cast.

Collectively, contemporary reviewers caught the novella's unmistakable Watergate tints. That much they agreed upon; more difficult to parse was the ulterior significance of Spark's enigmatic tale. Was it even a satire? David Lodge, in *The Tablet*, thought not. While the novella 're-enacts the Watergate affair', it was 'not a satire on the Nixon regime'. While the cunning twinning of 'two utterly different worlds' created a 'comedy of incongruity', the novella's 'tone' was not one of 'satiric indignation'. Rather, the mood was one of 'gaiety and glee'. Lodge preferred to describe *The Abbess of Crewe* as a 'parable', one in which the 'familiar theme that absolute power corrupts absolutely' was defamiliarized. For, as Lodge notes, the story is narrated 'from the point of view of the conspirators, never allowing the liberal moral consciousness to have its say.' Indeed, Lodge reckoned that the Catholic novelist had 'no moral response at all' to the sublunary affairs of Watergate.⁴⁶ Lorna Sage, in *The Observer*, followed a parallel path. While 'worldly' novelists seemed 'to have their noses put a bit out of joint by the rival productions of the White House fiction machine', Spark had paid 'a magnanimous tribute' to the Watergate conspirators. The Catholic novelist saw more clearly than secular writers that all profane history partakes of sin; therefore, 'the only heroism is to sin in style'. Alexandra achieves, Sage argues, 'a state of euphoric wrongdoing', which draws the reader 'irresistibly to conspire with the heroine's sheer style.'⁴⁷ On a related note, Gabriele Annan in the *Times Literary Supplement* also found the novella a 'parable', 'a parable about art and its incompatibility with religion', except 'in paradoxical coexistence'. The effect, Annan contended, was like a 'trance', but short-lived, for the story itself was so 'silly'.⁴⁸

Indeed, according to Updike, in the *New Yorker*, Spark's 'paradoxes' made for 'indifferent satire', indeed he found the Watergate allegory inappropriately thin, 'a rather lame echo of a plot that in real life never wearied of thickening.' Rather the novella worked best as 'a transfiguration' of Watergate, and was at its least compelling when it was mechanically 'aping' political events.⁴⁹ A similar note is struck by Patricia Mayer Spacks in the *Yale Review*. Spacks perceived the direct comparison with *Gulliver's Travels*. Spark's tale of a nunnery thrown into convulsions by the theft of

⁴⁴ Not that Spark was entirely apolitical, or altogether ignorant of American politics. See her brief anthologies of extracts, Muriel Spark, 'Poetry and Politics', *Parliamentary Affairs* 1 (1948), 12-23; Spark, 'Poetry and the American Government', *Parliamentary Affairs* 3 (1949), 260-72. I am indebted to Prof. Willy Maley for these references.

⁴⁵ Muriel Spark, 'My Conversion', *Twentieth Century* 170 (autumn 1961), 58-63, at, pp. 60, 62-3.

⁴⁶ David Lodge, 'Prime Spark', *Tablet*, 7 Dec. 1974, p. 1185.

⁴⁷ Lorna Sage, 'Bugging the Nunnery', *Observer*, 10 Nov. 1974, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Gabriele Annan, 'Holy Watergate', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 Nov. 1974, p. 1277.

⁴⁹ Updike, 'Topnotch witcheries', pp. 343, 345.

a thimble succeeded in 'miniaturizing political concerns' after the fashion of Swift's Lilliput. While Spacks enjoys the 'ingenuity of the equivalences' in Spark's Watergate novellas, she also senses the limitations of the genre: 'Once you've thought of big men and little men, as Dr Johnson pointed out, the rest is easy'. Thus, Spark is most entertaining when she engages in 'deliberate violations of parallelism', as in the Abbess's taste for the English poetic canon.⁵⁰

But were the novella's primary concerns religious at all? Emma Tennant, in *The Listener*, detected class – the ubiquitous leitmotif of the English novel – at the heart of Spark's tale. Everything about Sister Felicity screamed bourgeois bad taste, and what Alexandra could not abide was Felicity's 'irremediable middle-class-ness'.⁵¹ Inevitably, this calls to mind the fiction of Waugh in which it is hard at times to distinguish the social from the theological components of recusant aristocratic Catholicism. Spark, however, had little truck with the psychological realism so characteristic of the English novel of class; she, like Alexandra, was an imposer, not an observer.

Nevertheless, there was clearly disagreement, about what is at stake in *The Abbess of Crewe* beyond an allegory of Watergate, and the puzzlement remains. The novella certainly transcends satire, and is possibly in some remote sense a Catholic parable. Moreover, the Abbess Alexandra is an utterly memorable character; once encountered, never forgotten. The novella perches precariously in a zone of studied ambiguity between judging Alexandra for her various deceits, her petty tyranny over the Abbey, her use of others as instruments rather than as fully human co-equals, and an indulgent complicity verging on admiration for Alexandra's stylish, uncompromising, highly aestheticized approach to life. Allegory is also overlaid, arguably, with deliberate self-satirizing, a portrait of the artist's own whimsical authorial despotism. Alternatively, of course, this revelation of the capricious side of Spark's character is unconscious and inadvertent: an accidental glimpse, perhaps, of the Devil's cloven hoof.⁵²

⁵⁰ Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'New Novels: In the Dumps', *Yale Review* (summer 1975), pp. 583-94, at 589-90.

⁵¹ Emma Tennant, 'Holy joke', *Listener*, 14 Nov. 1974, p. 649.

⁵² Cf. Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock, 2000), p. 88, where he identifies Alexandra as one of 'Spark's novelists manqués', her 'wilful determiners of society', and describes her as 'Spark's most complete and sympathetic fictional double'.