

A response to 'The School's Embrace' by Irina Dumitrescu
Tanja Baudoin

Irina Dumitrescu's essay evokes the city of Poitiers in France as a site where different scenarios of 'schooling' take place. Dumitrescu moves across time to consider the different meanings of the word school, from the judging of Jeanne d'Arc in 1429, to Guibert of Nogent's relationship with his schoolmaster in the 11th century, to her own encounter with the birth house of Michel Foucault that has in recent times turned into an institution for juvenile delinquents. She assembles these pedagogical spaces in Poitiers and presents the school as "an embrace across time". The word 'embrace' denotes an intimacy, a smothering, a fondness, and a means of control, all at the same time. And in my experience, school is indeed all these things.

I might briefly add to the stories of Irina Dumitrescu by reading a fragment from a novel that sketches a portrait of a teacher that I think embodies these various meanings of 'the school's embrace'.

The novel is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* written by Scottish writer Muriel Spark. It was published in 1961, but the story takes place in the 1930s in Edinburgh. It tells of a teacher, Miss Jean Brodie, and six of her pupils, 'the Brodie set', a special group of girls that she has singled out to become her confidantes and her elite unit that she shapes according to her beliefs.

Chapter 1

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

The girls could not take off their panama hats because this was not far from the school gates and hatlessness was an offence. Certain departures from the proper set of the hat on the head were overlooked in the case of fourth-form girls and upwards so long as nobody wore their hat at an angle. But there were other subtle variants from the ordinary rule of wearing the brim turned up at the back and down at the front. The five girls, standing very close to each other because of the boys, wore their hats each with a definite difference.

These girls formed the Brodie set. That was what they had been called even before the headmistress had given them the name, in scorn, when they had moved from the Junior to the Senior school at the age of twelve. At that time they had been immediately recognizable as Miss Brodie's pupils, being vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum, as the headmistress said, and useless to the school as a school. These girls were discovered to have heard of the Buchmanites and Mussolini, the Italian Renaissance painters, the advantages to the

skin of cleansing cream and witch-hazel over honest soap and water, and the word 'menarche'; the interior decoration of the London house of the author of Winnie the Pooh had been described to them, as had the love lives of Charlotte Brontë and of Miss Brodie herself. They were aware of the existence of Einstein and the arguments of those who considered the Bible to be untrue. They knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland. All of the Brodie set, save one, counted on its fingers, as had Miss Brodie, with accurate results more or less.

By the time they were sixteen, and had reached the fourth form, and loitered beyond the gates after school, and had adapted themselves to the orthodox régime, they remained unmistakably Brodie, and were all famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking. They had no team spirit and very little in common with each other outside their continuing friendship with Jean Brodie. She still taught in the Junior department. She was held in great suspicion.

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Their walk had brought them into broad Chambers Street. The group had changed its order, and was now walking three abreast, with Miss Brodie in front between Sandy and Rose. 'I am summoned to see the headmistress at morning break on Monday,' said Miss Brodie. 'I have no doubt Miss Mackay wishes to question my methods of instruction. It has happened before. It will happen again. Meanwhile, I follow my principles of education and give of my best in my prime. The word "education" comes from the root e from ex, out, and duco, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion, from the Latin root prefix in meaning in and the stem trudo, I thrust. Miss Mackay's method is to thrust a lot of information into the pupil's head; mine is a leading out of knowledge, and that is true education as is proved by the root meaning. Now Miss Mackay has accused me of putting ideas into my girls' heads, but in fact that is her practice and mine is quite the opposite. Never let it be said that I put ideas into your heads. What is the meaning of education, Sandy?'

From: Muriel Spark, *The Pride of Miss Jean Brodie*, London: Penguin Books, 2000. pp. 5-6; 36-37.