Muriel Spark's Italian palimpsests

Carla Sassi

Muriel Spark's relationship with Italy was a long-standing and meaningful one. It arguably opened with a vicarious but life-shaping experience, that of her Edinburgh school teacher Miss Christina Kay's great love of Italy and its art, which would later inform Miss Jean Brodie's similar love for Italian art and unsettling fascination with the aesthetics of Italian fascism. It closed with her death, in Florence, on 13 April 2006, as the famous Scottish writer who had become an 'adoptive Italian', as the obituary in the *Corriere della Sera* remembered her.¹ She had lived in Italy for 40 years — almost half of her life — and she was laid to rest in the cemetery of Oliveto, the little Tuscan village where she and her companion, Penelope Jardine, resided. The simple inscription on her tomb is in Italian, a language Spark knew quite well, even though she never fully mastered it² — 'MURIEL SPARK / POETA / 1918-2006'. It was Jardine's idea to add two lines from one of Spark's poems, 'Canaan' (1952), translated into Italian by Jardine herself:³ 'Nessun foglia si ripete / ripetiamo solo la parola' ('Not a leaf / Repeats itself, we only repeat the word').⁴ In-between these two distant moments, Spark enjoyed the glamour of the *dolce vita* and the intensity of the extraordinarily rich and cosmopolitan intellectual life of 1960s and 1970s Rome, and the withdrawn pleasures of rural Tuscany in the following decades, until her death. She also witnessed the darkest moments of the *anni di piombo*, the 'Years of Lead' (1969-1978), culminating with the kidnapping of Italian statesman Aldo Moro — a decade marked by terrorist attacks and violent political protest, as well as by the shadow of the State's collusion with right-wing terrorism. This was a period of stunning tensions and contradictions — on the one side bringing to the fore extraordinary radical expressions of political thought and power, on the other soliciting the response of right-wing activists, and even reinforcing the field of influence of secret (criminal) organizations, from the mafia to the illegal P2 masonic lodge. So much absorbed by Italian politics was Spark, that her last project — at an embryonic stage when she died — was a novel, titled *Destiny*, focused on Roberto Calvi,⁵ the Chairman of Banco Ambrosiano,

embroiled in the 1981 cataclysmic political scandal which involved the P2 lodge, the Vatican and the mafia.

Throughout her career as a writer, Spark's work often engaged explicitly with aspects of Italian life, history, art and politics. In her articles and essays, she wrote wittily and elegantly about the country where she resided. As an interviewee in Italian newspapers and magazines, besides discussing her work and writerly concerns, she occasionally challenged Italian readers with her views on Italian politics, religion and ways of life. We know that she was an avid reader of Italian newspapers and popular press, and watched Italian TV with great curiosity. Her fiction too addressed Italian themes: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* engages with Italian Fascism, while three of her novels — *The Public Image* (1968), *The Takeover* (1976), and *Territorial Rights* (1979) — have an Italian setting. *The Driver's Seat* (1970), set in an unspecified Southern European city, was inspired by the actual murder of a 'garishly dressed' German tourist in Rome.⁶ In *The Only Problem* (1984) Spark deals with a terrorist (inspired by Italy's Red Brigades), and in *Symposium* (1990) there are references to both Venice and Florence. In mere quantitative terms, however, her explicit engagements with Italy and Italian subjects represent only one aspect, albeit a substantial one, of her writing. Also, while she commented widely on her decision to convert to Catholicism, she was much more laconic and evasive in relation to her decision to live in Italy. In this sense, it comes as a relative surprise that critics have so far largely overlooked her relationship to Italy, focusing more on her self-declared 'Scottishness', or discussing her 'cosmopolitan' outlook and literary style. In most critical investigations of her work, Italy indeed seems to represent a location as accidental as Southern Rhodesia or New York, or any of the many places she lived in or simply visited in the course of her life. But did Italy really represent a chance encounter, and a mere exotic backdrop to her cosmopolitan career? Was it really, as critics seem to imply, just a congenial residential environment, as it has been indeed for numberless foreign writers and artists, seduced by its proverbial beauty and by the widely celebrated wealth of its historical and artistic heritage?

This article will contend that Spark's relationship with Italy, far from being accidental or inspired by merely pragmatic or romantic concerns, represented a 'homecoming' of sorts. 'I settled in Rome [...] because I found myself returning there again and again, staying longer and longer',⁷ Spark explains, implying an almost natural attraction or affinity with the country. The Italy of the late 1960s and 1970s, with its 'intricate psychological, social and political make-up', its 'breaking down of barriers between the personal and the political, the private and the public, and high and low culture', and its 'generational and gender conflicts [...] of truly historical proportions',⁸ did not simply provide an exotic backdrop to her narratives, but a palimpsest of traces that accommodated and very likely oriented her literary imagination. It is also worth stressing that Spark never embraced Italianness, and remained a liminal, if highly discerning observer. The depth of her representations of Italy is striking — she obviously relished playing in a post-modern manner with the well-established catalogue of 19th and 20th century literary imaginations of the *Bel paese*, even though she never conformed to them, standing out as an informed, exceptionally sharp and independent-minded commentator.

The use of the term 'palimpsest' here does not rely exclusively on Gérard Genette's theorisation, as Spark's texts seem to engage 'transtextually',⁹ not exclusively with Italian literary texts, but also with literary or visual, even popular and filmic representations of Italy, stretching to include the melodramatic imagination in 1960s and 1970s Italian popular culture. 'Palimpsest' here thus generically stands for a trope of transformation and construction, and refers to a layering of discourses involving personal and collective memories, experiences and imaginations of Italy. As the nature of palimpsestic layering is one of transit, of multiple borders crossed, the identification of 'Italian palimpsests', very much like that of Scottish ones (more thoroughly investigated in Spark scholarship), does not imply in any way exclusiveness or closure, but rather a point of departure, a privileged angle from which to observe the wider world.

The article will focus on Spark's four novels that explicitly engage with Italy/Italian themes and/or have an Italian setting — *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Public Image*, *The Takeover*, *Territorial Rights* — and will attempt to map out their palimpsestic dialogue with Italy. The choice

of these four novels relies on criteria of cohesion and consistency — the last three novels reveal in fact a number of common features and themes, so much so as to represent a potential ‘Italian trilogy’. Italian palimpsests in fact do represent a discreet, subterranean thread in other works by Spark, the fictional origins thereof can be identified in the memorable re-imagining of Italian Fascism in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961).

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie: between Giotto and Mussolini

Martin McQuillan aptly describes *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as ‘Spark’s novel of Fascism and fascisms’.¹⁰ Brodie’s prime indeed opens officially in 1930 and closes in 1939, thus running parallel to the rise of fascisms in Europe. *The Prime* may also be said to represent the parabola of (Italian) Fascism, from a more seductive phase, when Brodie innocuously mesmerises her young pupils with her fantastic stories and eccentric opinions, to a darker and explicitly violent one, when she sends one of her students to join and die for Franco’s cause in Spain, and eventually turns to Hitler’s brown shirts as a new and more inspiring model. What has not been observed so far, is that Italy, or rather Spark’s imagination of Italy, provides a central interpretative key to her investigation of Fascism/fascisms, both as an historical and a universal expression.

It may be worth noting that Spark’s first encounter with Italy took place in Edinburgh in her childhood days. The Italian community in Scotland, which had started forming in the 1860s, was already a ‘settled and family-based’ one by the 1880s and 1890s.¹¹ The 1933 Italian Census counted a little more than 400 Italians living in Edinburgh, mostly from southern Italy¹² — a small community but already well visible through its cafés and businesses. Edinburgh had indeed been acquainted with Italian art and culture long before their arrival, for example through the collections of Renaissance and Baroque paintings at the Scottish National Gallery, or the visits of internationally renowned artists, such as tragedienne Adelaide Ristori (in 1875) and tenor Enrico Caruso (in 1909). The community Spark must have been acquainted with was, however, largely one of poor, often illiterate immigrants, more associated with trade and food than the arts. Scottish-Italians’ status had

remarkably improved during WW1, when they fought in British trenches, while Italy sided with the Entente Powers.¹³ It had further improved with the rise of Fascism, which, in its initial phase, was looked at benevolently by most European leaders, including Churchill. Brodie's claim that 'Mussolini has performed feats of magnitude and unemployment is even farther abolished under him than it was last year',¹⁴ indeed echoes Churchill's words of praise for a political leader who was widely admired in the UK in the 1930s. In Edinburgh, as in other parts of the UK, Fascist clubs became a familiar presence — for many Italian immigrants they represented indeed a 'way to satisfy nostalgia and replace a sense of belonging and nationality', or an opportunity to socialise.¹⁵ When Mussolini declared war on France and Britain in 1940, Spark was already in Rhodesia, and did not witness the deportation to internment camps of all adult men of Italian origin, now declared 'enemy aliens'. She must, however, have been aware of it.

It was Miss Kay who unwittingly provided a very young Spark not only with new information, but with an ordering principle to convert what must have been only scattered impressions into a coherent 'vision'. In *Curriculum Vitae* Spark recollects the walls of her teacher's class as 'adorned with reproductions of early and renaissance paintings, Leonardo da Vinci, Giotto, Fra Lippo Lippi, Botticelli', and displaying 'a newspaper cutting of Mussolini's Fascisti marching along the streets of Rome'.¹⁶ It is indeed the superimposition of these images, from different discourses of Italy, that will eventually give life to Brodie's palimpsestic fantasy. Upon her return from her latest Italian trip, 'bronzed' by the Mediterranean sun, she offers her students pictures and aphoristic descriptions of her visit: 'Here is a Cimabue. Here is a larger formation of Mussolini's fascisti [...]. They are doing splendid things as I shall tell you later. I went with my friends for an audience with the Pope [...]. I wore a long black gown with a lace mantilla, and looked magnificent'.¹⁷ Images of pleasure and sensuality, a sense of fashion (defined in terms of a bold juxtaposition of glaring colours elsewhere in the novel), the achievements of Mussolini, the 'exotic' rituals of the Catholic Church are all conflated in a single, sketchy and yet intense picture.

By collapsing the borders of heterogeneous discourses of Italy (an approach she will follow also in her 'Italian novels'), not only does Spark expose their arbitrary nature, but also moulds out a new perspective, subtler than it may seem at first glance. Brodie's take on Italian Fascism as an essentially *aesthetic* enterprise, as a performance, in which the body and clothes have a central importance — an expression that is more visual than ideological — recalls Walter Benjamin's idea that fascism represents an aestheticisation of politics.¹⁸ It chimes even more closely with Umberto Eco's observation — in his famous essay on 'Ur-Fascism' — that 'Italian fascism was the first to establish a military liturgy, a folklore, even a way of dressing — far more influential, with its black shirts, than Armani, Benetton, or Versace would ever be'.¹⁹ In *The Prime*, then, Fascism, is treated as one of the multiple, half-obsured but co-existing layers that constitute Italianness, and that stretch out to shape or embrace a wider, transnational or 'universal' vision.

The Public Image: Pirandello meets La Dolce Vita

The Public Image is Spark's only novel entirely written and set in Rome, and it no doubt captures, among many other things, her impressions during her first two years of life in the Eternal City. Spark often looked back at that period as an intense and shaping moment in her career as a writer, and claimed that memories of it had 'imprinted themselves on all subsequent experience'.²⁰ Marked by an experimental, *nouveau-roman* turn, this is indeed a novel that 'reaches back through her whole history as an artist',²¹ as Martin Stannard has suggested. It evokes Spark's strained personal and professional relationship with her former partner Derek Stanford through the fictional tension between the protagonist, a successful English actress, Annabel Christopher, and her frustrated and increasingly envious husband Frederick. It also echoes Spark's well-documented obsession with her own 'public image',²² which she honed in her first Roman years, when she mastered the subtleties of the '*bella figura*' — the art of being glamorous and wooable, and, at least in her case as much as in Annabel's, of remaining aloof and keeping her private life utterly private. *The Public Image*, however,

also foregrounds an interesting network of allusions to Italian high and popular culture, that have hitherto remained unexplored.

A first intertextual strain that runs through the novel is distinctly Pirandellian. This is not unprecedented in Spark's work, as she placed Luigi Pirandello among her favourite authors, the only Italian writer, beside Leonardo Sciascia, to figure among those great 20th-century masters — from T.S. Eliot to Marcel Proust, from Chekhov to García Márquez — who made her 'feel fortunate in having been born in a rich century for literature'.²³ Alan Bold is one of the few critics who discusses at some length Spark's Pirandellian vocation, in relation to her play *Doctors of Philosophy*, first performed in 1962 in London. 'As in Pirandello's classic *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*', Bold observes, Spark's script 'makes great dramatic play of the nature of role playing, the fusion (and confusion) of appearance and reality. Some of Spark's characters know they are acting parts in a theatrical drama and so are self-conscious about the act of perception'.²⁴ In fact, her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957) had also featured a 'Pirandello-puzzle of identities',²⁵ as the *TLS* put it: here, Caroline Rose, who hears voices and a ghost typewriter, becomes convinced that she is a character in a novel someone is writing.

Likewise, *The Public Image* focuses on the quintessentially Pirandellian meditation on the fluid boundaries between appearance and reality, between literary representation and real life. Annabel is utterly absorbed by the meticulous construction and careful maintenance of her public persona, which she is determined to keep separate from her private life. Her true self remains inaccessible and unknowable throughout a novel whose language 'is coolly informative, journalistic in its bland presentation of the contours of [her] career'.²⁶ Annabel, who was insignificant in England, a 'puny little thing',²⁷ becomes an object of desire in 'Italy the Motherland of Sensation',²⁸ thanks to the producer Luigi Leopardi, who transforms her into the globally seductive 'English Lady-Tiger'. The transformation does not entail any physical change in Annabel, and is exclusively realised through the means of the camera eye — it is thus entirely a matter of perspective, an art-induced illusion. While Annabel takes her public image very seriously, to the point of conforming to it even

in her private moments, Leopardi, significantly, 'was not at all concerned or cynical about the difference between her private life and her public image; he did not recognize that any discrepancy existed'.²⁹ Leopardi's nonchalant awareness of the permeable boundaries between appearance and reality, make Spark's choice of his name — in fact a pseudonym, his real name being Vincenzo (or a diminutive 'V' for his friends)³⁰ — seem less of a coincidence and more of a playfully deliberate choice. Merging Luigi Pirandello with the Italian Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi, who ascribed great importance to the function of illusions, asserting that only illusion, which in itself is false, can make one's life if not happy, at least pleasurable,³¹ may indeed be suggestive of how Italian culture represented for Spark a rich source of inspiration for her own investigation of the elusive border separating reality from fiction. The relevance of the Italian perspective in this context seems to be reinforced by the Italian proverb 'the more sophisticated readers' of popular magazines and newspapers use to convey their awareness that the Tiger-Lady might be an entirely artificial persona. 'If it isn't true, it's to the point'³² — 'Se non è vero è ben trovato' (which could be better translated as 'If it isn't true, it is well conceived') — stands out as the summa of a fluid perspective on art and life, whereby truth and aesthetic form stand equal to one another and are indeed interchangeable.

The second intertextual strain takes Pirandello into an altogether different and unexpected direction. The setting of *The Public Image* is the glamorous scene of the 1960s *dolce vita*, but the novel is definitely more intent on playing meta-textually with the myth built around Federico Fellini's iconic film, than on providing a fresh perspective on the decade. There is a clear reference to *La dolce vita* (1960) in the first part of the novel, where Annabel plays the role of an English governess in a film scripted by her husband. The film

had progressed to a point where she was shown to slip out of the house one hot, still night, and gone to dance in the plashing bowl of the great Bernini fountain in the Piazza Navona, to cool off the passion she had conceived for the master of the house (whose wife was carrying on with an Italian painter, anyway – at the insistence of the

film company's directors, who felt that her infidelity made her husband's affair with Annabel more moral). This harmless film made Annabel's reputation, although it was itself rather lifeless.³³

This is of course the 'wrong' fountain (Fellini had Anita Ekberg/ Sylvia bathe in the Fontana di Trevi), but the fact that Annabel's fame as an actress is triggered by that single iconic scene, allows us to further expand the comparison between the 'English Lady-Tiger' and the Swedish sex-symbol. Both lionised in Italy more for their exotic appearance than for their acting skills, they become trapped in an objectifying (and mortifying, since both are deemed 'stupid') public image that spreads worldwide. The meditation upon the shifting boundaries of public and private, of fiction and reality is then grafted onto a feminist agenda, as Spark's novel can be read as an attempt to redeem the objectified actress, 'more acted upon than acting, caught up and created in the image of many, often contradictory demands and desires',³⁴ in Vassiliki Kolocotroni's words.

While the quotation from Fellini is explicit, there might be a second, more cryptic, reference to another reified and vilified female character of the post-War Italian cinema. In Michelangelo Antonioni's *La signora senza camelie* (*The Lady Without Camelias*) (1953), a young and attractive shop assistant, Clara Manni, becomes suddenly and unexpectedly a star thanks to an insignificant film, (ironically) titled *Woman Without Destiny*, in which she plays a small part. The public is enraptured by her persona, but Clara soon loses control of her fate, as she ends up being exploited by the ruthless machine of film production and marketing. She makes the fatal mistake of marrying the movie executive, Gianni, who becomes jealous of her success and decides to direct a film — ambitiously premiered at the Venice Film Festival — with Clara starring as Joan of Arc. The disastrous and humiliating failure of the film ruins Clara's career, consigning her to minor roles as a sexual object. While it is more than likely that Spark had seen this film, it may prove difficult to find

evidence of its direct influence on her novel. And yet, not only are the similarities between the two, in terms of plot and characters, striking, but both focus on the same central theme — the tension between the public and private image in the age of pervasive mass-media. Antonioni's film, as Jonathan Rosenbaum remarks, oscillates 'between the shifting centres of public events (filmmaking, premieres, "scandals"), [...] and the relatively shallow stasis of more private moods and events, where figures and settings seem locked together [...] in the desolation of frozen space'. For Rosenbaum, this 'fundamental dichotomy' finds its highest expression in the film's final shot, that portrays a defeated and heartbroken Clara accepting her fate and posing for the photographers, 'when the capacity to smile for publicity photographs becomes the very token of her alienation and despair'.³⁵ Annabel seems to have learnt the lesson, and unlike Clara she eventually prevails over her husband's (and other men's) plots to control her and curb her independence. Not only does Annabel succeed in neutralising her husband's final attempt to script her life by committing suicide and having her publicly blamed for his suffering, but we also witness her voluntary departure for Greece, at the end of the novel, towards a new future:

Nobody recognized her as she stood, having moved the baby to rest on her hip, conscious also of the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas.³⁶

This closing poetic image appropriates and reverses Frederick's scathing definition of Annabel as an empty shell,³⁷ and signals her newly gained strength and independence. It does that by foregrounding a goddess image, possibly 'recalling', as Kolocotroni suggests, 'the emergence from the sea of Botticelli's Venus',³⁸ or indeed evoking a pagan Madonna with child (a possibility inscribed in her surname, Christopher, from the Greek 'bearer of Christ').³⁹ The picture is indeed reminiscent of Spark's description of Piero della Francesca's 'Madonna del Parto' ('Our Lady of Childbirth'), which

she sees as both an 'ordinary woman' and 'divine essence', and 'as if, about to deliver her child, she is herself about to be delivered from a vaster, cosmic womb'.⁴⁰

Not only does *The Public Image* engage in an explicit and subtly subversive intertextual dialogue with *La dolce vita*, with the intent of redeeming its most famous female protagonist, it also has a structural affinity with Fellini's film. Both Fellini and Spark focus their attention on the morbid interest of the modern audiences in scandals and illicit sexual escapades, an interest fostered and exploited in post-War Italy by the popular *rotocalchi*, illustrated magazines dedicated to news, as well as to sensation, sex, gossip, and crime. By offering both a visual and a narrative version of contemporary (glamourised) stories and events, *rotocalchi* thus stand in a relation of co-referentiality with cinema, and often provide a source of inspiration to film directors, or are in their turn influenced by the cinematic imagination.⁴¹ Antonio Costa actually describes *La dolce vita* as a '*rotocalco*-film', insofar as it 'emphasises its own genesis and the close kinship, in post-war Italy, between the film industry and what can be termed the "cultural form" of the *rotocalco*'.⁴² Costa goes on to discuss how the impact of the consumer-oriented media is both a central theme in the film, and part of the history of its making, so that 'the very form of the film is defined through the process of its production alongside that of its promotion'.⁴³ *The Public Image* shows a very similar fascination for and dependence on the mediatic process. Behind it, there is certainly Spark's amused interest in the Italian press: 'the journalists here are more imaginative than any I know. A combination of Latin blood and a free press, unlike in Spain', she said in an interview. 'I think that a lot of their energy, which might have gone into novel writing, goes into their reporting'.⁴⁴ It would be difficult to establish to what extent Spark's '*rotocalco*-novel' was inspired by Fellini, or by her own life-long interest in the Italian media. What matters here, however, is the identification of a further layer in Spark's palimpsestic imagination of Italy.

The Takeover: the (Italian) comedy of a (global) revolution

The Pirandellian dilemma takes yet another shape in *The Takeover*, mainly set in the area of Lake Nemi, near Rome, in the early 1970s. Here, the shifting border between reality and representation runs between the tangible and local wealth of its cosmopolitan characters, and especially of Maggie, the rich and glamorous American who lives in a villa by the lake, and the abstract wealth symbolised in the technical language of the new world of global finance. The epochal shift between different philosophies of money and property is memorably outlined in the course of a dinner hosted by the Marchese Berto di Tullio-Friole, Maggie's husband:

They talked of hedges against inflation, as if mathematics could contain actual air and some row of hawthorn could stop an army of numbers from marching over it. They spoke of the mood of the stock-market, the health of the economy as if these were living creatures with moods and blood. And thus they personalized and demonologized the abstractions of their lives, believing them to be fundamentally real, indeed changeless. But it did not occur to one of those spirited and in various ways intelligent people around Berto's table that a complete mutation of our means of nourishment had already come into being where the concept of money and property were concerned, a complete mutation not merely to be defined as a collapse of the capitalist system, or a global recession, but such a sea-change in the nature of reality as could not have been envisaged by Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud.⁴⁵

Longer than most Spark's novels, *The Takeover* is a fascinatingly complex and ambitious investigation of the intersections between the concepts of property, legality and religious faith, framed in a wider reflection on the meaning of truth and appearance. The pivotal scene described in the above passage is set in October 1973, the date of the fourth Arab-Israeli war and the OPEC oil embargo, marking the beginning of a global energy crisis and the rise of a new form of capitalism, integrating national economies into a global economy of expanding trade and financial flows. Even though hingeing around themes and events of world-wide resonance, this is Spark's most Italian novel. Not

only does it discerningly represent the Italian late 1960s and early 1970s scene, characterised by social and political tensions, rising crime and political as well as criminal kidnappings, but it also deploys Italy as a privileged perspective from which to view a rapidly changing world. Spark's portrait of Italian society is far from flattering or idealised — stifled by a legalistic mindset and bureaucratic excesses, this is a country endemically plagued by fraud and corruption, making the life of unequipped expats like Maggie a mixture of paradise and hell. What makes the novel stand out among numberless literary and popular representations (from the Renaissance to the present day) of Italy's dark heart, is the fact that it deploys it as an eccentric and yet privileged standpoint from which the complexities of the contemporary world may be freshly reassessed and even counterbalanced.

In *The Takeover*, Italy is repeatedly represented as an intrinsically conservative culture, in touch with the most ancient layers of its past history. This devotion to continuity is conveyed in the opening of the novel by two palimpsestic figurations — Maggie's villas described as having 'foundations of Roman antiquity, and of earlier origin if you should dig down far enough',⁴⁶ and Italian Catholicism depicted as hiding underneath the surface, as Father Cuthbert puts it, 'a large area of pagan remainder to be explored. And absorbed into Christianity. A very rich seam'.⁴⁷ In this context, it may be not too surprising that the ancient goddess Diana is revealed to be a persistent presence in the woods of Nemi, where her temple — one of Spark's favourite haunts while writing this novel⁴⁸ — can still be visited. The presence of the goddess is not only a fantasy nurtured by Maggie's mystical and Diana-devoted friend, Hubert Mallindaine, but a deeper reality or a core truth about Italy itself. 'Modern Nemi', the informed narrator remarks, quoting *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer, 'at the end of the last century [...] appeared to Frazer to be curiously an image of Italy in the olden times; "when the land was still sparsely peopled with tribes of savage hunters or wandering herdsmen"'.⁴⁹

Spark's imagined Italy — a country entrenched in its backward economic and social practices and yet opening up, in the 1970s, to globalisation — clearly represents a formidable line of resistance against the rising power of transnational finance. Italy resists globalization by clinging to its ancient practices, exactly like the spirit of Diana still inhabits the woods of Nemi notwithstanding the effect

of centuries of Christianisation. Comparing Maggie's experience with that of Lauro Moretti, her trusted secretary/butler (as well as part-time lover and secret agent), a ruthless and yet comic mercenary, may provide an illustration of this. Maggie is the victim of repeated burglaries, and eventually becomes a pauper when the broker to whom she has entrusted the management of all her money and properties — the evanescent Coco de Renault — disappears without leaving a trace, soon after producing 'an appealing global plan for [her] fortune, so intricate that it might have been devised primordially by the angels as a mathematical blueprint to guide God in the creation of the world'.⁵⁰ Lauro instead carefully buries the treasures that he steals from Maggie's house or obtains in other, illicit ways, in a flower-bed on his mother's grave – a primordial (and highly symbolic) hiding place that proves to be, ironically, much safer than Maggie's bank, which is unable to protect her jewellery from robbers. Lauro also ends up as the owner of the land on which Maggie's three villas are built, by marrying into the Italian family that has always owned it, unbeknownst to Maggie, who finds out that her purchase contracts of the land are fake only at the end of the novel. Her villas, therefore, as the Italian lawyer Massimo de Vita patiently explains, reframing the Pirandellian dilemma between illusion and reality, do not exist: 'in Italy if a house is not on the records, it has been constructed illegally and we call it *abusivo*. An *abusivo* construction does not exist in legal terms'.⁵¹ By the end of the novel, when Maggie has lost everything and accepted that she will be never able to trace her disloyal broker, she has no choice but to rely on Lauro, who has the mafia kidnap Coco, so that she can retrieve her money as ransom.

In the novel's strange finale, an unrecognizable Maggie, dressed like a 'crone',⁵² comes across Hubert in the woods of Nemi at night. She reveals to her puzzled friend the truth about the kidnapping of Coco: the media claim he has been hidden in California or Brazil, but no, he has in fact been tucked away in a cave in the woods of Nemi all the time,⁵³ under Lauro and Maggie's surveillance. Comically, then, at the end of the novel, in an unexpected turn, the local takes over the global (the most unpredictable of all takeovers contemplated by Spark), and Lauro (a 'national type' in many respects, as we shall see) becomes indeed, in Bold's words, the 'mercenary master of the situation'.⁵⁴

Maggie, however, also seems to emerge strangely empowered from her many vicissitudes. The closing paragraph, very much like the closing paragraph of *The Public Image*, superimposes the image of a goddess — Diana of the woods and of the night — onto the female protagonist. Maggie, as a reincarnation of Diana, has returned to nature, and by doing so has gained a clearer vision and a sense of direction — her material wealth replaced by the bountifulness of the landscape:

She said good night very sweetly and, lifting her dingy skirts, picked her way along the leafy path, hardly needing her flashlamp, so bright was the moon, three-quarters full, illuminating the lush lakeside and, in the fields beyond, the kindly fruits of the earth.⁵⁵

Finally, it is worth considering briefly the form and structure of *The Takeover* — largely those of a comedy, for all its focus on complex and challenging issues. Bold has claimed that the characters of the novel recall ‘the cast of an *opera buffa*’, whose ‘absurdity [is] appropriate to the era of the 1970s’.⁵⁶ It would seem, however, more appropriate to consider a model Spark was certainly familiar with, especially in the light of her interest in Italian popular culture. The novel seems in fact to echo the stylistic features of the *commedia all’italiana* (Comedy Italian Style), a genre defined by a series of films produced between 1958 and 1970, and representing an extremely popular national form of entertainment. Films like *Il sorpasso* (*The Easy Life*) (1962) by Dino Risi, or *Signore & signori* (*The Birds, the Bees and the Italians*) (1965) by Pietro Germi, or the many films featuring the iconic Italian actor Alberto Sordi, ‘had huge commercial success, its actors became iconic figures [...] and left a lasting legacy for the generations of Italian comic filmmakers who followed it’.⁵⁷ Many of the recurring features of this genre can easily be identified in *The Takeover*: an episodic structure, a focus on the conflict of the individual with society, an interest in moments of traumatic social and economic change (characterising Italian society possibly more than any other European countries),⁵⁸ a representation of identity as problematic or labyrinthine.⁵⁹ These films also foreground characters that stand for, or become icons of national identity, usually defined in (comically) negative terms. In

Spark's novel, *Lauro* in particular stands as a catalogue of all the vices that characterise the male protagonists of this genre, so much so as to function as its parodic critique: he is always immaculately dressed; he is highly melodramatic, consistently shrewd and totally unscrupulous, and thus able to draw advantage from any situation; he soulfully pays tribute to his dead 'mama' [sic]; a ruthless womanizer, he nonetheless upholds traditional family values, and eventually gets married to a conventionally modest Italian girl. Very much as with *La Dolce Vita*, however, even the *topoi* of the *commedia all'italiana* are subtly subverted by Spark, who chooses a female, rather than male, protagonist, and empowers her by endowing her with the features of a goddess. Maggie is quite different from the (mostly) soulless sexual objects or the humble housewives, perennially imprisoned in their domestic roles, ubiquitous in 1960s and 1970s Italian films. Italy-as-comedy, therefore, is just one of the palimpsestic fantasies of Italy upon which other layers of meaning are rewritten.

Territorial Rights: Venetian palimpsests and Gothic terrors

Spark visited Venice for the first time only in 1975, so *Territorial Rights*, like *The Public Image*, reflects a recent personal experience — not a first impression though, as Venice can never be a first impression. Any first-time visitor will come to it with a rich baggage of images and suggestions already fixed in his/her mind. There must be few other places in the world that have been imagined by as many writers and artists as Venice: as Manfred Pfister has observed, 'nothing in Venice has not been written about, and written over, again and again; everything is a palimpsest'.⁶⁰ Venice is thus always an imagined place before being a real city — always a 'reflection', on the water of its canals as well as on the minds of its many illustrious visitors, before being a tangible place. 'Venice is a city not to inspire thought but sensations', Spark claims in her short and lucid essay: 'one can think in Venice, but not about Venice'.⁶¹ Indeed, her essay is rich in literary quotations, from Ruskin, to Byron and Henry James — even Spark's critical and discerning eye is somewhat hindered by century-old layers of literary imagination.

While *Territorial Rights* develops a number of themes seen in the previous two novels, and especially in *The Takeover* — Italy's legal and bureaucratic mazes, the threat of terrorism and kidnapping, beside endemic blackmailing, fraud and corruption — it also explores new territories. This is a much darker comedy, with no central character, and an extremely complex and dense plot, twisted in narrative threads that disquietly echo and intersect each other. There is a novel-within-the-novel written by the English student Robert Leaver, uncovering the crimes and misdemeanours of the other main characters; there is another novel-within-the novel, an unbearably sentimental kitchen-sink drama, read, in her home in Birmingham, by Robert's mother, Anthea; and there is a flurry of letters, travelling in different directions, many of them anonymous, that continuously subvert the stability and consistency of the main narrative threads. Such structural instability is mirrored also in the precariousness of the lives of the main characters — either tourists, or émigrés, they are all displaced and they all harbour dark secrets, from murder to espionage, from adultery to involvement with Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s.

We are indeed faced with a kaleidoscopic combination of events and characters which is so surreal, fragmentary and grotesque that it evokes, as Matthew Wickman has suggested, 'a postmodern schizophrenia' marked by a 'climate of paranoia', with the novel itself seeming 'fundamentally unsure about its own narrative stance'.⁶² In this context, the line uttered by one of the characters visiting Venice, the English tourist Mary Tiller, speaking over the phone to Anthea — "It may seem far-fetched to you, Anthea, but here everything is stark realism. This is Italy"⁶³ — takes on a subtly ironic, metafictional meaning. Mary here seems to be referring to a specific discourse of Italy, popularised by post-war Neo-realism — a national film movement focusing on the lives of the subaltern, and often featuring non-professional, working-class actors. This may be how Mary (still) imagines Italy in the 1970s, or how Italy was imagined across the world, but there is an obvious mismatch between the discourse of (Neo)realism and the dark, chaotic comedy with Gothic overtones unfolding before the eyes of the reader.

If some form of cohesion can be traced in such ‘self-consciously convoluted plot’⁶⁴ and ‘bleak vision of total pandemonium’,⁶⁵ it is provided by the city itself. Venice may be seen, in some way, as the missing central character of the novel, a presence that encompasses the schizophrenic layers of the narrative, as much as it comprises its own different and often conflicting imaginations. The novel opens with the arrival of Robert in Venice, still hurting after a squabble with his lover, and ‘noting everything he passed on the way to the Pensione with a merely photographic attention’.⁶⁶ His early attempt at recording Venice objectively is soon revealed to be an impossible task, as the ‘photographic gaze’ is contradicted and replaced by different perspectives, revealing Spark’s conscious play with the literary *topoi* of the city. For example, just a few pages after the description of Robert’s arrival at the Pensione Sofia, we are faced with an almost Disney-like, highly self-conscious Gothic snapshot, depicting Bulgarian political exile Lina Pancev’s dwelling:

From the street, this room projected like a large bird, a dangerous-looking piece of masonry, yet not dangerous presuming the bird could fly. The beak protruding from its small window was at this moment devoid of its washing, and the small black mouth was shut, unlike the windows underneath it, set further back into the building.⁶⁷

The novel is indeed characterised by an abundance of Gothic elements — from the many unsettling doubles, reflections and echoes, to the Gothic (and palimpsestic) ‘irregularity’ of the city’s architecture, famously celebrated by Ruskin, and most effectively symbolised in the novel by St Mark’s pavement: “‘I wondered if I was drunk or was the floor cockeyed. It’s hallucinating’”, Mark Curran remarks, “‘the pavements in St Mark’s were made to be wavy [...] Then they were restored with the rest of the church but some of the original crookedness remains’”, Grace Gregory explains.⁶⁸ That this information is not supported by any canonical study of St. Mark’s architecture, just places it more firmly in Spark’s palimpsestic imagination of Italy.

It is the depiction of Venice as a dark, dangerous place that prevails in the novel, then, from Shakespeare's city of secrets, plots, murder and corruption, to Thomas Mann's vision of an alluringly dying and decaying world, magnified in Luchino Visconti's magnificent film adaptation of Mann's novella, *Death in Venice* (1971). And yet, at the heart of the novel, lies a redeeming presence: the church of Santa Maria Formosa. "I'm starting off with Santa Maria Formosa. It's a curvaceous building, most unusual", Robert announces at the beginning of the novel, "I've looked it up in the library. There are some vague legends about the name, but my thesis is that the name of Santa Maria Formosa originally came from the 'formosa' of the Song of Solomon in the Bible. Original Latin: *Nigra sum sed formosa* – 'I am black but comely'. It was a prefiguration of the Madonna according to the early theologians".⁶⁹ Santa Maria Formosa is indeed one of the first eight churches founded in Venice, and the first dedicated to the cult of the Madonna — *formosa* in Latin means 'beautiful', while in modern Italian, if referred to a woman, means 'buxom' (a meaning Spark playfully evokes in the term 'curvaceous', possibly also justified). That the name of the Venetian church is derived from the Song of Solomon is not, however, supported by any established study, and is very likely a projection of Spark's interest in the figure of the Black Madonna.⁷⁰ Santa Maria Formosa will appear several times in the course of the novel, thus evoking the image of a semi-pagan Madonna, an ancient female deity (in line with the two previous novels) presiding over the chaos, embracing the enigma of Venice — 'dark' and 'beautiful' and 'feminine' at the same time.

That Venice is the main character in *Territorial Rights* is somewhat confirmed by the closing paragraph of the novel, zooming out from the garden of Pensione Sofia to embrace the whole city and its palimpsestic history, layer by layer: 'the canals lapped on the sides of the banks, the palaces of Venice rode in great state and the mosaics stood with the same patience that had gone into their formation, piece by small piece'.⁷¹ The timeless movement of seawater against the palaces and walls of Venice is matched by the image of the slow construction of the equally timeless mosaics. It is as if, with the exit of the vociferous actors that have strutted and fretted on the stage of the novel, the city can reveal, in a fleeting glimpse, its deeper essence, flowing back to the source of all palimpsests.

Conclusion

Spark's knowledge and understanding of Italy, and especially of contemporary Italy was remarkable and remarkably original, and very much part of her literary project. This is not matched, however, by an adequately articulated commentary in her non-fictional writings, which provide little or no guidance as to her interests and connections. This, and the fact that she often referred to popular, mediatic, filmic materials, rather than canonical literary works, makes an academic investigation of her palimpsestic imagination of Italy an adventurous and complex, and yet worthwhile journey.

The present essay has mapped, with no pretence at being exhaustive, some of the possible interpretative paths through Spark's imagination of Italy, with the main aim to demonstrate that her relationship with Italy and Italian culture was intense and influential, no doubt beyond the four novels accounted for here. This is certainly an angle that deserves closer attention and further research, and that may indeed throw new light on Spark's method of work and transnational legacy.

¹ Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti, 'Muriel Spark: dama toscana di Sua Maestà', *Corriere della Sera*, 16 April 2006.

² This is evident from her notes/letters to Italian friends, preserved at the Muriel Spark Archive (National Library of Scotland), which are fluent and yet marked by a number of grammatical errors, at least up to the late 1990s. See also, Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson), pp. 404, 529.

³ See Alan Taylor, *Appointment in Arezzo: A Friendship with Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2017), p. 171.

⁴ The correct Italian form of the word here would be 'nessuna'.

⁵ Taylor, *Appointment in Arezzo*, p. 168.

⁶ Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p. 363.

⁷ Muriel Spark, 'Italian Days', *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, ed. Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), p. 80.

⁸ Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio, 'The 1970s through the Looking Glass', *Speaking Out and Silencing. Culture, Society, and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (Leeds: Legenda, 2006), p. 1.

⁹ See five types of transtextuality in Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Orig. Editions du Seuil 1982), pp. 1-6.

¹⁰ Martin McQuillan, 'Introduction. "I Don't Know Anything about Freud": Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism', *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 4.

¹¹ Terri Colpi, *Italians' Count in Scotland. The 1933 Census Recording History* (London: The St James Press, 2015), p. 41.

- ¹² Colpi, *Italians' Count in Scotland*, pp. 107, 114.
- ¹³ See Colpi, *Italians' Count in Scotland*, pp. 87-99.
- ¹⁴ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 45.
- ¹⁵ Mary Contini, *Dear Olivia: An Italian Journey of Love and Courage* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), p. 258.
- ¹⁶ Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 56.
- ¹⁷ Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, p. 44.
- ¹⁸ Walter Benjamin (1936), 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 244.
- ¹⁹ Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', *The New York Review of Books*, 42, 11 (22 June 1995)
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>
- ²⁰ Spark, 'My Rome', *The New York Times*, 13 March 1983.
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/03/11/specials/spark-rome.html>
- ²¹ Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, p. 349.
- ²² See, among others, Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, pp. 210, 215, 228, 253, 259, 299.
- ²³ Muriel Spark, 'The David Cohen British Literature Prize', *The Golden Fleece*, p.103.
- ²⁴ Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 25.
- ²⁵ 'Questing Characters', *TLS*, 22 February 1957, p. 109.
- ²⁶ Bold, *Muriel Spark*, p. 89.
- ²⁷ Muriel Spark, *The Public Image* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 7.
- ²⁸ Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 24.
- ²⁹ Spark, *The Public Image*, pp. 33–34.
- ³⁰ Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 9.
- ³¹ See Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. by Michael Caesar, Franco D'Intino, trans. by Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom, and Pamela Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 182.
- ³² Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 28.
- ³³ Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 19.
- ³⁴ Vassiliki Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark', *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 21.
- ³⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'La Signora Senza Camelie', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 42.496 (1975)
<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2018/07/la-signora-senza-camelie/>
- ³⁶ Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 125.
- ³⁷ Spark, *The Public Image*, p. 92.
- ³⁸ Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark', p. 21.
- ³⁹ Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark', p. 22.
- ⁴⁰ Muriel Spark, 'The First Christmas Eve', *The Golden Fleece*, p. 8.
- ⁴¹ See Raffaele De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta: romanzi, fotoromanzi, rotocalchi cinematografici: il film e i suoi paratesti* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), pp. 3–7.
- ⁴² Antonio Costa, *Federico Fellini. La dolce vita* (Torino: Lindau, 2010), p. 90. [My translation].
- ⁴³ Antonio Costa, *Federico Fellini*, p. 91. [My translation].
- ⁴⁴ 'Muriel Spark Talks to George Armstrong', *The Guardian* 30 Sept 1970, p. 8.
- ⁴⁵ Muriel Spark, *The Takeover* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 90–91.
- ⁴⁶ Muriel Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 16.
- ⁴⁸ Spark, 'Italian Days', p. 100.
- ⁴⁹ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 42.
- ⁵⁰ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 100.
- ⁵¹ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 137.
- ⁵² Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 188.

⁵³ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 189.

⁵⁴ Bold, *Muriel Spark*, p. 104.

⁵⁵ Spark, *The Takeover*, p. 190

⁵⁶ Bold, *Muriel Spark*, p.104.

⁵⁷ Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Space: Comedy, Italian Style* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

⁵⁸ See Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Space*, p. 4.

⁵⁹ See Maria Pia Comand, *Commedia all'italiana* (Milano: Il castoro, 2010), pp. 7-9.

⁶⁰ Manfred Pfister, 'The Passion from Winterson to Coryate', *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, ed. Manfred Pfister and Barbara Schaff (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 15.

⁶¹ Muriel Spark, 'Venice', *The Golden Fleece*, p. 84.

⁶² Matthew Wickman, 'Spark, Modernism and Postmodernism', *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, pp. 67, 68.

⁶³ Muriel Spark, *Territorial Rights* (London: Virago, 2014), p. 147.

⁶⁴ Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), p. 98.

⁶⁵ Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, p. 99.

⁶⁶ Spark, *Territorial Rights*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Spark, *Territorial Rights*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Spark, *Territorial Rights*, p. 137.

⁶⁹ Spark, *Territorial Rights*, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁰ See Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark', p. 126, n. 53.

⁷¹ Spark, *Territorial Rights*, pp. 219-220.