

11-21-2019

Scenic and Textual Venice in Muriel Spark's Territorial Rights

Tomás Monterrey
Universidad de La Laguna

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Monterrey, Tomás (2019) "Scenic and Textual Venice in Muriel Spark's Territorial Rights," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, 56–72.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol45/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

SCENIC AND TEXTUAL VENICE IN MURIEL SPARK'S *TERRITORIAL RIGHTS*¹

Tomás Monterrey

Muriel Spark chose Venice as the main setting for her fifteenth novel, *Territorial Rights*, published in 1979 between *The Takeover* (1976) and *Loitering with Intent* (1981). *Territorial Rights* anticipates the latter's metafictional concerns about novelistic distortions and fabrications of truth on rendering life facts. With the former it shares a satirical view on western moral decadence, an Italian background, and an illustrative instance of a "takeover," as young Robert Leaver begins his criminal career by challenging American millionaire Mark Curran in his Venetian territory, while both are ultimately ousted and defeated by the even more illicit detective-agency GESS. This Sparkian "entertainment" (so highly praised by Graham Greene), or "international comedy of manners," with a heavily-plotted story and the "starkly realistic texture of a thriller" may aptly typify a new departure in the Scottish novelist's art of fiction.² The narrator's apparently limited omniscience brings together a compelling polyphony of characters and thus a rendition of events through their individual, unreliable, and often contradictory points of view. Spark's technique ostensibly blurs what F. K. Stanzel called the authorial narrative stance in order to generate a consistent multi-figural external perspective (associated with modernist fiction), which focuses on dramatic dialogues, actions and gestures, and conveys impressions that could be gathered by any character

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Muriel Spark Centenary Symposium, University of Glasgow, February 1, 2018.

² Graham Greene, cited in Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark. The Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2010), 438; David Lodge, "Prime Cut," *New Statesman* (27 April 1979): 597; Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London: Methuen, 1986), 107; Alex Hamilton (interviewing Spark): "She wants every book to be a completely new departure—new form, new theme, new style": *The Guardian* (8 November 1974): 10.

or potential observer, as if the narrator were rendering a sharp account of a performance art piece.³

Privacy and spatiality feature prominently in the title of the novel. Spark unfolds a map of a world with Venice at its center, where a group of non-Italian—but mostly English—characters happen to meet on purpose or by chance. The city provides Spark with a fanciful stage, an evocative surface, which both conceals mysteries and stimulates sensations. In a notable essay, she declared that:

Venice is a city not to inspire thought but sensations. I think it is something to do with the compound of air, water, architecture and the acoustics. Like the effect of these elements on the ear, there are acoustics of the heart. One can think in Venice, but not about Venice.⁴

Spark loved Venice, and yet her depiction of the city struck some reviewers as odd and perfunctory, despite her faultless—though terse—descriptions. For example, in 1979, contrasting Spark's description with Daphne du Maurier's in her 1971 short story "Don't Look Now," Francis King observed that "whereas Miss du Maurier's is notable for its meticulous attention to details, Miss Spark's is no less notable for its airy impressionism."⁵ Frank Kermode claimed that "Venice has never seemed so commonplace, in novels or out," while alerting readers to Spark's subtle and innovative voice: "if the story seems to be superficial or to be lacking in point, we can be fairly sure that we are reading it lazily or naively."⁶ In contrast to these views, thirty years later, Martin Stannard praised Spark's Venetian setting as "a diaphanous creation, seeming effortlessly to float between sea and sky while also sinking and stinking, its fogs hiding malice and truth," and remarked that "this macabre comedy was more overtly symbolic than anything Muriel had written since *Robinson*, and, as with the island in that novel, ... Venice itself becomes the central character."⁷

These opposing perceptions denote a shift from assuming a realistic setting to admitting Spark's novelistic, imaginary transformation of the city to serve her fictional purposes. How did the Scottish writer depict real Venice in her novel? In which ways did the city, its culture, and its artistic

³ F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 186-200.

⁴ Muriel Spark, "The Sensation That Is Venice," *The Times* (13 May 1988), 32; republished as "Venice" in *The Golden Fleece*, ed. Penelope Jardine (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), 84-89.

⁵ Francis King, "Venetian Lark," *The Spectator* (28 April 1979, 28-29): 28.

⁶ Frank Kermode, "Judgment in Venice," *The Listener* (26 April 1979, 584-85): 584.

⁷ Stannard, as in n. 2 above, 430, 432.

treasures influence her narrative technique? These are some of questions explored in this essay.

1. Defamiliarizing Venice

Joseph Hynes has perceptively interpreted the theme of *Territorial Rights* in the light of 1 Chronicles 29:15: “For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.”⁸ For him, Spark’s characters “are all nomads, so internationally involved in their pursuit of sex and money (the customary motivation of comedy) as to be safe at home nowhere,” and Venice, he adds, “admirably establishes this theme,” because it “is a vestige of high civilization, sacred and secular, encroached upon by water” and because “like all else terrestrial,” it “is threatened by flux” (127). Apart from these significant general features of the universally known city, Spark subtly transforms, especially in chapter one, the realistic space of Venice into a symbolic stage where her tale is performed, and evokes, as Hynes observed, the biblical depiction of Earth where humans (and thus characters) are portrayed as strangers, sojourners and ultimately shadows.

The novel’s opening sentence, “The bureau clerk was telephoning to the Pensione Sofia while Robert Leaver watched the water-traffic at the ferry and the off-season visitors arriving in Venice,”⁹ situates the story in time and place, introduces the central character and adds randomness—which is a key component of unpredictability, indeterminacy, and chaos—as the clerk tries to find lodging for Robert. Moreover, it indirectly anticipates newcomers to the city, masses of tourists and passers-by, out of which the characters would emerge to shape the Sparkian microcosmic sample of humanity in modern, decadent European society.

As Robert leaves the tourist office and heads for Pensione Sofia, half of his mind feels “enchanted” by “the imperative claims of Venice the beautiful on first sight” (5), while the other half anxiously echoes over and over again old Mark Curran’s goodbyes at the final breakup of their homosexual affair in Paris. The conflict in Robert’s mind subsides on his way to his residence: “With this angry memory not far behind, Robert let himself take in Venice, noting everything he passed on the way to the Pensione Sofia with a merely photographic attention” (5). Robert’s mental operations epitomize the novel’s tension between paranoia and schizophrenia. Besides the characters’ pervasive feeling of paranoia at being observed, followed, and threatened (which increases the thrilling

⁸ Joseph Hynes, *The Art of the Real. Muriel Spark’s Novels* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 127.

⁹ Muriel Spark, *Territorial Rights* (London: Granada, 1980), 5. All quotations below are from this edition, cited in the text by page number in parentheses.

intrigue), an overall atmosphere of schizophrenia haunts the form and structure of the novel by means of repetition, reproduction, duality, duplicity, and division, which also conjures up uncanny and comic effects.

In his analysis of the modernist and postmodernist aesthetics in *Territorial Rights*, Matthew Wickman has argued that readers only capture fragments of “what is most pertinent” in an episode and are left with the impression that “crucial events and meaning are elsewhere.”¹⁰ For him, “this effect of myopic belatedness creates an atmosphere of paranoia—of powerful agents exerting a causal force from distant but hidden locations” (66). Wickman further argues that this mode of narrative paranoia co-exists with “postmodern schizophrenia” (67), which he detects not only in “its division into multiple personalities,” but also in the “text’s internal echoes” that reveal “themselves as fragments of unassembled diegetic wholes, that is, of the larger worlds ... suggested by the story” (67). In this light, in one of the few introspective comments, the narrator shows Robert’s brain division engaged simultaneously in perception and memory, and both are rendered superficially: Venice is observed “photographically,” that is, detailed, fragmentary, and void of any intellectual penetration beyond mere perception; while Curran’s chain of “goodbyes” and boredom with him only hint at the very end of their relationship about which almost nothing else will be told. The reader is thus forced either to speculate or, more reasonably, to stick to the photographic details and sketchy scenes shown by the narrator, avoiding curiosity into other matters obviously discarded by Spark as blatantly inconsequential.

Robert’s constitutional duality and alienation is emphasized when he chooses the room with two windows instead of the other with one window and a full bath, a decision on which the narrator bestows some importance. One of the windows looks on to the garden and the canal behind. Both the land and watery spaces share the common feature of possessing a beautiful surface that masks rottenness and putrefaction. Underneath the neatly cared-for garden lies the corpse of Bulgarian regicide Victor Pancev (Lina’s father), cut in two after being murdered back in 1945, while the poisonous water of the canal reflects the marvels of the world above, though the mirrored object is a funeral (84). The other window “had a view of a large square with a bulbous church at the end of it” (7). By first introducing Santa Maria Formosa by its shape rather than by its name, Spark hints early on at her transfiguration of Venice for her narrative space. She employs the realistic technique of framing images (in this case by windows) to make them symbolically meaningful without disturbing the

¹⁰ Matthew Wickman, “Spark, Modernism and Postmodernism,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. Michael Gardner and Willie Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 66.

plausible rendering of fictional events. Both the church and the garden will be key spaces charged with complex significance throughout the novel. As for Robert, the two window views foreshadow the spaces that mark his trajectory from an ordinary young person, or simply the Leavers' son (replaced now by Anthea's goldfish), into a villain and terrorist. It will be at "the curvaceous building" (19) of Santa Maria Formosa where Giorgio and Anna, in the role of what are known in chaos theory as "strange attractors," will deflect the course of Robert's life towards them, and his rite of passage will culminate at the garden on the night that, by his design, Bulgarian defector Lina Pancev dances unknowingly on her father's grave.

Spark's choice of Santa Maria Formosa (St Mary the Beautiful, the first Venetian temple devoted to the Virgin Mary and the center of the maidens' annual procession in the Renaissance), and her first description of the city as "the beautiful" (5) are significant in a novel about corruption and sexual promiscuity. On the one hand, the description of the church by its shape veils its religious function, while still denoting a relic of spirituality. On the other, seventeenth-century Venice was famously known as the maiden city married to Neptune.¹¹ In *Territorial Rights*, the essential purity of both the church and the city is blurred by the characters' immoral secrets, plots, and desires.

As soon as Robert unpacks, he tours the city and the narrator embarks on the task of constructing the Venetian novelistic stage. Robert's first visit takes him to Santa Maria Formosa, about which he wants to write his doctoral thesis. As he stands at the northern Baroque façade of the church, the narrator describes the square and mentions the pharmacy and the Bar All'Orologio ("Dell'Orologio," 8), both which still exist to date. Authenticity was a key factor in Spark's method of writing fiction. In an interview with Sara Frankel, she declared herself to be extremely scrupulous about real facts and about checking any factual information she would include in her novels, for example, whether or not it had rained on a certain day. On being asked by Frankel if that kind of detail is important, she answered: "Yes, because it's authentic. And then within that realistic framework I can do what I like with the unreal."¹²

Spark, however, undermines such authenticity at the conclusion of her description when she asserts that: "Standing within the church doors you could, of course, see a short way down the side-path leading from the far end of the square to the street-gate and old-fashioned front garden of Pensione Sofia" (8), but no nearby building in the compact district north of

¹¹ William Wordsworth still cited this epithet in his sonnet "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" (1802, line 5).

¹² Sara Frankel, "An Interview with Muriel Spark," *Partisan Review*, 54:3 (1987): 443-457 (451).

Campo di Santa Maria Formosa affords a small front garden and a more spacious one at the rear; Spark's description of this lodging faithfully matches a different building, Pensione Accademia—Villa Maravege, which is situated on the other side of the Grand Canal, near Galleria dell'Accademia. Villa Maravege had hosted the Russian Consulate during the interwar period, becoming a hotel in 1950, after the Second World War, and Spark herself stayed there during her first trip to Venice in 1975.¹³ The unnecessary "of course" in the text tries to gain the reader's connivance at her re-adjustment of real locations to set up the novel's fictional space. Similarly, there was no Hotel Lord Byron at the Grand Canal in the 1970s, but the use of the name in the novel not only triggers a reminder of the poet's dissolute morality during his stay in the city, but also of his poetical satirical outlook, suggestive of Spark's intertextual indebtedness to the Romantic poet.

The second step in Spark's process of defamiliarizing Venice concerns the problematic relationship between topography and language. When Robert asks the whereabouts of a certain address in a bar, the narrator remarks that "the question was not really stupid" (8). Although the local people try to help Robert, they prove incapable of spotting it on the city map: "they knew where every place in their city was, but they didn't know the streets by names. Where was this address near to, what monument, what bridge, what shop, what church? Was it up or down the Grand Canal from the Rialto Bridge?" (8). The address is eventually pinpointed by a Canadian student who recognized the street name. In this episode, Spark subtly reveals two compatible codes of reference for Venetian topography: the more natural, realistic code based on city markers, and the more conventional, linguistic code based on place names, which is reserved for foreigners. This does not mean that Spark tends to drop place names in her text. In fact, she does the opposite. Her Venetian sites are mostly reduced to the area of Campo di Santa Maria Formosa and Pensione Sofia, and to indoor settings such as Hotel Lord Byron, Violet de Winter's Palazzo, Lina's attic in a decaying, run-down building (instances of which still existed in the 1970s), and Giorgio's premises and hiding room for victims of criminal kidnap.¹⁴ By raising awareness of the two co-existing codes of

¹³ Stannard 431.

¹⁴ Other places are hardly referred to. Astoundingly for a Venetian novel, the Rialto Bridge is mentioned only once (just in the sentence quoted above). The Doge's Palace, St Mark's and its square necessarily appeal to tourists both as meeting (or watching) points and as unique artistic attractions. Arnold Leaver and his lover Mary Tiller said they "went to the Frari church to see *The Assumption* of Titian" (36), and Curran, on learning of the large sum of money he must pay for Robert's ransom, "went down to the quay and looked at the scene, with its coffee-table

reference, Spark alerts readers to the pre-eminence of her novel's textuality over any other claim regarding the realistic depiction of space. This idea is emphasized when Robert discloses the core theme of his doctoral thesis to Curran by explaining the meanings of "Formosa" in ancient Hebrew, as if they were any different from the original Latin term (beautiful form or shape). To show his disinterest in the matter, Curran replies that "the church might well be named merely after its own shape. Quite simply that" (19). His view echoes (or, alternatively, contaminates) the narrator's first description of it as "a bulbous and comely church" (7) and reinforces Spark's materialistic presentation of the Venetian scenic background, or dramatic stage, through surfaces and sensorial perceptions. However, the Venice of *Territorial Rights* is far from lacking in deeper signification. In this respect, the novelistic setting is charged with meanings that pervade the whole story, like in modernist aesthetic, whereby visual elements subject to symbolic interpretation are not presented within frames, but integrated in the space where the narrative action unfolds. For example, whereas the description of Santa Maria Formosa only highlights its architectonic shape, the ground floor of Pensione Sofia evokes an ancient temple with the rear garden as its *sancta sanctorum*.

The introduction of Curran signals the third step in defamiliarizing the Italian city, this time by expanding the Venetian cosmology with the supernatural, which is such a characteristic of Spark's fiction. Compared to the emphasis on textuality, surfaces and sensorial perceptions of the second step, the addition of the supernatural component brings in her famous "nevertheless principle," coined in her essay "What Images Return" in an attempt to rationalize her conversion to Catholicism.¹⁵ It describes the oxymoronic relationship between the evidential certitude of an event happening and its actual occurrence. The supernatural in the novel does not emerge as paranormal phenomena of any kind. It manifests itself in three different ways. One concerns the recognition of real invisible forces or "powerful agents," using Wickman's words quoted above; the other admits weirdness through an endless series of contrived coincidences and duplicities, typical of comedy but unusual in real life. The third is suggested in the middle part of chapter one when Spark transfigures Venice into a transcendental space by adding a cosmic dimension to the maze of lanes, bridges and canals: "Robert walked through the lanes and

picture charm, and the Riva degli Schiavoni" (138-39), from which—fittingly enough, given the novel's satiric and comic nature—the Bridge of Sighs can be best admired.

¹⁵ Muriel Spark, "What Images Return," in *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, ed. Karl Miller (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 151-53. 152. Originally published as "Edinburgh-Born," *New Statesman* (10 August 1962), 180.

across the bridge, under the clear stars and over their reflection in the waters" (17). While the real stars may evoke a remote transcendental realm, the powerful Sparkian image of their reflections on the surface of the putrid canals is more suggestive of the evil realm of Lucifer than of a merely realistic description of a rare—though not impossible—sight in very still, dark waters.

The narrator says Mark Curran "knew Venice well: it had been his territory for the best part of his life, in the late thirties and after the war onwards" (13), and reiterates some lines further down the page that "Venice was very much his territory" (13). Coincidentally, the American millionaire bears the name of the patron saint of Venice, but his dominion is mundane. By creating this character who insists on being called just Mr Curran or simply Curran—although his reasons for it "were difficult to puzzle out" (12)—Spark foregrounds the overlapping of abstract modes of earthly spatial arrangements over the merely physical and political division of world territories. In fact, this overlapping will turn out to be one of the key axes of the plot structure when, in subsequent chapters, Anthea Leaver absent-mindedly activates the intervention of the detective agency GESS, whose strict world-division into territories according to their criminal business goes beyond the narrator's privilege and limited omniscience, though readers are at least told that Violet de Winter is GESS's chief agent "for Northern Italy and adjacent territories" (65).

Besides generating both uncanny and comic effect in the story, the excessive number of coincidences and duplicities depict Spark's Venice as a chaotic space where characters are forced to constantly negotiate unpredictability in their lives and, as a result, personal self-assessment.¹⁶ Apart from the striking similarity between the sisters who run Pensione Sofia, Katerina and Eufemia, whom the narrator describes as "almost interchangeable" (12), the first notable repetition occurs when Robert suddenly sees Lina taking her garbage from under her voluminous skirt and furtively throwing it into a canal. He is startled when recalling that he first met her in Paris doing exactly the same thing and has the feeling of an uncanny experience: "He stood where he was, staring at the mystery of this

¹⁶ *Territorial Rights* is heavily modeled on chaos theory. In addition to Giorgio and Anna acting as "strange attractors," as mentioned above, Robert's unlawful career is accelerated—like the effect described by the second law of thermodynamics—by a subsequent chain of raids and a series of encounters with "talent spotters," who will eventually lead him and Anna to be trained at a terrorist camp in the Middle East. "Fractality" (objects or individuals that replicate their self-similarity on descending scales) is also pervasive, for example, in Arnold's multiple love affairs, Robert's inheritance of his mother's terrorist nature, Lina's replication of her father's compulsive promiscuity, Anthea's reactivation of the GESS scheme, and Giorgio's improvement of his late Fascist-butcher master's barbarous skills.

exact repetition of events in another city. It was a near-hallucination” (10); but immediately afterwards, the narrator, conveying Robert’s reaction in free indirect style, rationalizes this impression by acknowledging Lina’s way of life: “and, after all, it was no mystery, for Lina obviously had taken the same sort of poor lodgings and settled in with her forbidden spirit-stove” (10). At the end of chapter one, when Robert catches a glimpse of a man and a woman arriving at Pensione Sofia, his bodily response precedes his conscious recognition of his father: “Robert gave a shiver some seconds before he really saw these people, probably because he had not slept well and so was specially intuitive” (24). In this other episode, the narrator attempts to give a more convincing explanation for Robert’s reaction, instead of implying a mystery or hallucination, and yet it firmly sets up a slightly supernatural thumbprint in the Italian stage of *Territorial Rights*.

Throughout chapter one, Spark endeavors to construct and delineate her own fictional Venice in her elegant and poetical style, avoiding purely descriptive parts by opting for subtle suggestions skillfully interlaced within narrative statements and dialogues.¹⁷ Once her stage has been shaped, this chapter closes, almost as it started, with Robert taking the water-bus. This event is narrated in Spark’s typically austere style: “A water-bus arrived. They [Robert and Curran] watched, with automatic blank-faced attentiveness, the faces of the other people who were getting off at this stop. Robert embarked with the waiting crowd. Curran walked away” (29). Yet, besides confirming the end of their homosexual affair, they are blended into the constant flux of the water-bus passengers, conjuring a synecdoche of the 1 Chronicles view of humanity as strangers and sojourners.

2. Venetian Art

In chapter two, Arnold Leaver and Mary Tiller invite Curran for a drink at their room in Hotel Lord Byron. The narrator focuses on the kitschy Venetian ornamentation by adopting Curran’s point of view: the swan-shaped, “atrocious bed” (39) and the fresco on the ceiling depicting, among other images, “a very flesh-coloured nude classical rider whose biceps were so large as to be not really healthy” (35). While Arnold delights in the original eighteenth-century painting of his room, Curran retorts that “he didn’t think the eighteenth-century was their [Venetian styles] best period”

¹⁷ Muriel Spark often commented on her poetical frame of mind when writing fiction. For example, in an interview with Ian Gillham, she said: “I think I am still a poet. I think my novels are the novels of a poet. I think like a poet and react as one”: “Keeping It Short,” *The Listener* (24 September 1970): 412.

(35). This episode shows two key aspects of Spark's narrative presentation of Venetian art: on the one hand, a pervasive authorial preference for decadent styles and, on the other, the rendition of Venetian art through the characters' narrow, relative points of view, either expressed in dialogues or reported by the narrator in free indirect discourse.

After introducing Violet de Winter and her GESS-agent duties, the narrator tells us that she lives at Ca' Winter and adds "the large palace on the Grand Canal" (65). No further description is given, thus forcing readers to imagine the building. However, what might be taken as Spark's failure in missing the opportunity to enrich her text with a lustrous picture of Venetian architecture becomes a merit because of Violet's role. Unlike comic, absentminded plotters such as Anthea or Lina, GESS-agent Violet is a conscious deviser of scenarios and scandals, and a spotter of potential victims for blackmail. She employs other people to obtain information, like Lina (and probably also Leo), and carries out her GESS activities indoors.¹⁸ In order to foreground the spatial criminal dimension Violet overlaps on effective reality, the narrator overlooks the façade of her palazzo on the rainy evening and shows how she creates an alternative indoor environment. The narrator focuses on Curran's point of view and remarks in free indirect style: "She seemed to rule Nature, more and more as she got older. More and more he felt her to be his equal" (67-68).

In the cosmology of *Territorial Rights*, Violet stands at the intersection of a Venn-diagram of three spatial realms comprising the city topography, Curran's sentimental territory, and GESS's criminal district. To these three realms, a fourth must be added: the underground, physically located at Victor Pancev's grave, and symbolically attaching a quite different scenario of past events, which is no longer subject to full reconstruction, owing to the narrator's limited omniscience and to the partial witnessing and individual speculations (not to mention the invented additions) by those present at Pensione Sofia the night that Victor was murdered, butchered, and buried. The role of Violet as the pole interconnecting the various spatial layers of the plot structure is textually described by the narrator in another free-indirect-style statement of thought: "she considered herself to be one of the stones, if not the pillar, of Venice" (66), while insinuating a certain degree of creative indebtedness to John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, which contains the highly-influential chapter "The Nature of Gothic." Although literary Gothic ranks among the essential

¹⁸ The narrator's description of Leo verges on caricature: "He was stocky and strong with a head of Afro-frizzed hair and beard From this dark woolly cloud his two bright eyes peered out and his sharp nose ventured forth" (72-73). Nonetheless, his mask-like facial traits suggest his natural suitability to succeed in Violet's activities, which is what he actually does, as the epilogue indicates.

attributes of Spark's fiction, it can be argued that those features ascribed by Ruskin to this Venetian style of architecture permeate the form of *Territorial Rights*.

In "The Nature of Gothic," Ruskin enumerates the six characteristic elements of this style in order of importance from savageness, changefulness, and naturalism down to grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundancy.¹⁹ With respect to the sense of the *grotesque*, in this chapter Ruskin succinctly endorses the "tendency to delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as in sublime, images" (173) as a universal feature of the Gothic imagination, but defers its discussion to the chapter "Grotesque Renaissance," as if this Gothic quality were less prominent in the style than in the specific historical period when it emerged as its defining trait.

Ruskin singles out Santa Maria Formosa as the architectonic epitome for the political, commercial and moral decadence during the final years of the Venetian State (236). Two prominent features of the church help clarify the structure of the novel. One is the "head,—huge, inhuman, and monstrous,—leering in bestial degradation" (238), which decorates the keystone of the bell-tower gate, and the other is the Renaissance façade, both overlooking the western side canal and neither explicitly referred to in the novel, although the comic episode at the end, when Lina refuses to give Giorgio the suitcase containing the money for Robert's ransom, takes place exactly at that spot. For Ruskin, the late Renaissance Venetian architecture was "distinguished by a spirit of brutal mockery and insolent jest" (236); this head embodies "the type of the evil spirit to which Venice was abandoned" (238) and evidences "a delight in the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm, which is ... the most hopeless state into which the human mind can fall" (238). In *Territorial Rights*, Spark revives that head and the spirit(s) it portrays. Firstly, it can hardly be by mere chance that Spark chose this church as the core of her fictional Venice.

Although the monstrous head goes unmentioned throughout, a similar "spirit of brutal mockery and insolent jesting" pervades the novel, owing undoubtedly to the obvious parallelisms between Ruskin's outline of Venetian decay and Spark's own views on the contemporary state of literature and the arts. Working from her compelling, radical proposition that "ridicule is the only honorable weapon we have left," she contended that

to bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time, and

¹⁹ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, abr. ed. J. G. Links (New York: Da Capo, 1985 [1960]), 160.

above all to entertain us in the process, has become the special calling of arts and letters.²⁰

The literary expression of these opinions, conveyed when she was writing *Not to Disturb* (1971), culminated in *Territorial Rights*, characterized by an unsentimental, satirical glimpse at European civilization—both capitalist and communist—in the late 1970s, and by the merciless mockery of her victimized characters and the implacable deprecation of her manipulative ones—all of them grotesquely caricaturized and ridiculed. Secondly, Mr B. and Giorgio personify the head's "evil spirit" by their criminal dealings, which only differ in degree of sophistication and professionalism. In fact, Giorgio (and Anna) stands just outside Santa Maria Formosa on the afternoon when Robert is definitely attracted to his orbit, while Mr B. grins his physiognomic, mask-like smile, which embodies the spirit of grotesque comedy insufflated into the novel's atmosphere or, as Wickman has pertinently argued, "hypostatizes Spark's narrative tone" (67).

The other characteristics of Gothic architecture enumerated by Ruskin prove more elusive and, of all Spark's oeuvre, are difficult to identify exclusively in *Territorial Rights*. For a novel mostly set in English indoor spaces and in the watery urban environment of Venice, the feature of *naturalism* should be discarded. Yet, precisely for that reason, the autumnal fallen leaves significantly yield a sample of "the great ornamental system of foliation" (Ruskin 185) in the novelistic space. Besides the obvious connotations of decadence attached to autumn and the mysterious cause of the quarrel between Katerina and Eufemia that Robert witnesses from his room, in Venice, "the compost of dying leaves" (23) introduces an overall literary atmosphere of corruption and putrefaction noticeable as "the smoky smell of autumn fires, from one garden or another, hung about the air they breathed" (23). In England, when Anthea goes to GESS headquarter in Coventry, the narrator observes that "there were a few golden trees and the leaves lay on the pavement" and adds "as if Coventry were pastoral as of old" (41). This comment suggests the onset of the anti-romance plot in the novel when Anthea, a compulsive reader of domestic-realism novels, hires anti-knight Mr B. to save her marriage, unaware she is actually activating his criminal procedure.

Rigidity emerges more generally in Spark's astrigent, albeit poetical, prose style, while her northern (Scottish) *savageness* seems to be concomitant to her formation and frame of mind. However, Ruskin's notions of *savageness* and *changefulness* point to artistic experimentation,

²⁰ Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters* (New York: The Blashfield Foundation, 1971), 24, 26-27.

to self-conscious departures from the established rules characteristic of great classical architecture, which connect Gothic style with Mannerism and Baroque, and with Modernism and Postmodernism later on, by the shared common factor of “modernity,” whose emergence may occur at any time, as Jean-François Lyotard has explained: “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.”²¹ To a large extent, though sustained by different ideas, these styles have acted on the same principle highlighted by Ruskin for the Gothic artists: “they were *capable of perpetual novelty*” (167, italics Ruskin’s).

It is not the purpose of this essay to explore the novel’s realist, modernist, and postmodernist traits, but at least it should be noted that Santa Maria Formosa, besides its Renaissance western façade (which, as Ruskin observed, is without any religious decorative item whatsoever), possesses a newer northern Baroque façade, which matches Spark’s portrayal of the building’s “bulbous” shape, complemented by the high tower at its north-west corner.

As the two façades of Santa Maria Formosa bestow two conflicting sets of artistic principles on the church, so the form of *Territorial Rights* deploys an ambivalent nature. In some respects, it unfolds the plausible, well-structured story of a dramatic comedy.²² Yet the act of narration is performed by a manifestly competent, honest, and quasi-reliable teller who, contrary to the convention of realism, evinces limited omniscience. Besides producing some gaps of information, comparable for example to the playful broken lines, dark recesses, or empty niches in a Baroque building, this technique gives rise to a polyphony of voices that unrestrictedly express their opinions and accounts (sometimes including a story within another, like Serge’s experiences in England within Lina’s account of her defection from Communist Bulgaria). This polyphony of heterogeneous points of view and discourses also comprehends the explicit intertextual citations (such as the excerpts from the novel *Anthea* was reading and her mental reproduction of her Ayrshire grandmother reciting stanzas from poems by Robert Burns), the metafictional writing provided by Robert’s recollections and notes about the characters’ lives for a projected novel, and the title of the song “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” (71) being played outside a café.

²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 77.

²² Arguably, the structure of *Territorial Rights* may well fit a five-act comedy: Act I, chapters 1-4; Act II, chapters 5-7; Act III, chapters 8-11; Act IV, chapters 12-13; Act V, chapters 14-16; and epilogue, chapter 17.

The church, which used to host the annual ceremony to honor the maidens in medieval Venice, ironically marks the center of Spark's Venice, where—as Anthea imagines—everybody was “sleeping with each other” (76). More importantly, the adjacent spacious Campo di Santa Maria Formosa has always been a major venue during carnival season. In this respect, it can be suggested that the minimalist descriptions of the characters' physical appearances or costumes function like comic disguises, creating the effect of caricatures whereby their inner flaws, anxieties, and ambitions are pinpointed and exposed in a typically Sparkian space, which leaves no room for moral concealments.

As with the first description of Santa Maria Formosa by means of the adjective “bulbous,” symbolically denoting the low, earthly, unreligious role of the building on Spark's stage, the first descriptive statement of St Mark's Cathedral draws attention to its crooked floor. It occurs when Curran, after reading Robert's notes about the death of Victor Pancev at the end of the Second World War, becomes aware that his dismembered body buried in the garden of Pensione Sofia would surely validate whatever version of the events Robert may fabricate. In this mental state of awkward insecurity, Curran recalls an earlier visit to the cathedral, saying that the “document reminds me of the first time I went into St Mark's I wondered if I was drunk or was the floor cockeyed. It's hallucinating” (119). This is the second (and last) time the notion of “hallucination” appears in the text. While the repeated vision of Lina throwing her garbage into the canal produced in Robert the feeling of an altered spatio-temporal framework, Curran loses the sense of reality at finding himself in Robert's historical-biographical narration, spotted with a number of false, accusatory observations. It is then that he remembers the physically uneven surface of St Mark's, and not the fascinating geometrical patterns that decorate it, which any tourist who has been to Venice would expect to read about. It seems as if Spark were constantly warning readers about the risk of missing the essential points of her novel, which is what Grace Gregory does when she confirms Curran's remark about the floor by referring to the information in her guidebook.

Grace Gregory travels to Venice with her young companion Leo ready to help Anthea sort out her marital relations. Grace also had occasional sexual encounters with Arnold at Ambrose College, where he was the headmaster and she the matron. On her way to Italy, Grace makes a significant distinction between Mary and herself: “Mary Tiller's a cook, Leo, a whole cook and nothing but a cook. I'm a Matron. That's the difference” (64). Grace's pragmatic outlook on people and life is diametrically opposed to Mary's gifted sense of taste. While Mary went with Arnold to see Titian's *Assumption* in the Frari church, Grace lacked the sensibility to be touched by—let alone appreciate—beauty and art.

When she and Leo are flying over the Alps, the narrator says: “At the invitation of the voice over the loudspeaker, Grace ... looked out of the plane window at the Alps below and, having found no apparent fault with them, returned her attention to her companion” (64). In a like manner, after visiting the Doge’s Palace, she sums up her impressions to Anthea by merely observing that “you could put fifty drill-halls inside” (75). Strikingly, Spark bestows on Grace the privilege of uttering the sole descriptive comment on the Venetian mosaics. When she and Mary go to St Mark’s, they latch on to a guided group. In her telephone reports to Anthea about the events in Venice, Grace adds that the “‘guide was a lovely English gentleman of the old school. He brought things to your notice, like ‘note the ineffable beauty of the dark blues and the golds’—’At this point the line broke down.” (166). Given Grace’s character, it is intended to cause comic effect rather than an awareness of artistic value. However, it is significantly placed at the end of chapter fourteen—which begins with Violet explaining to Curran why Mr B. has come to Venice, and just before chapter fifteen which recounts how Robert disappeared and what he was doing at Giorgio’s premises. Grace’s quoting the guide’s words seems to be communicating a cryptic message from the extradiegetic, authorial realm, mediated by the English guide to illuminate not Grace—which he partly achieves—but the reader.

Spark’s mosaic technique in *Territorial Rights* has been extensively alluded to by critics in relation to either the narrative pieces or to the information provided. It can however be argued that it operates at a deeper level in the novel’s structure. Spark gives the Venetian mosaics extraordinary prominence by dedicating her closing sentence to them and by incidentally adding a rhetorical personification: “the mosaics stood with the same patience that had gone into their formation, piece by small piece” (188). The so-called St Leonard’s Cupola in St Mark’s ostensibly shows the dark blue and gold tesserae referred to by Grace who, unconcerned with any symbolic meaning of the saints in their heavenly state surrounded by the light of God, conveys a much more practical, earthly view, which rather hints at the personal secrets and wealth that GESS pursues through its business. The few saints in St Leonard’s Cupola bear the names or part of the names of some characters: Leo (from Leopold) in St *Leonard*, Anthea in St *Dorothea*, and Eufemia in St *Eufemia*; or partial anagrams: Arnold in St *Leonard*, Lina in St *Nikolaus*, Mary in St *Erasma*, etc. Spark’s anagrammatic creation of her characters (whether inspired by real people or not) partly reflects Robert’s way of distorting facts, or saying—following Giorgio’s report—“what ... is true, or as near as” (173); but, as Violet informs Curran, “Robert and the Butcher are amateurs” (158), whereas the GESS operatives are “professionals” (158).

When Anthea first visits Mr B.'s office, the narrator describes his careful elaboration of a more detailed mosaic on his desk as he "made a row of three cards on the desk in front of him, and behind them a further row of six," and "set about making yet a third row" (43). As Anthea speaks, he writes selected information on each of the cards, spread all over his table "like a regatta assembling on a calm bay, outside which the infinite sea chopped everywhere" (44). She is told that the information will be processed for security, so that "nobody would know where to look. The data are in several places at once.—Something like ourselves, if I may say so" (46).

Mr B.'s handling of data unveils Spark's professional tactics of depicting true facts by collecting information over tesserae cards to be subsequently processed through a similar anagrammatic code in order to obscure the underlying reality for anyone ignorant of that code. Indeed, whereas Robert foresees the characters' reactions but fails to achieve his goals, GESS rules over the space as suggested by the metaphor of the sailing-boat race in the bay of Venice. When Mr B. takes over the pursuit of Curran's money, the simile of the regatta becomes a highly symbolic visual element integrated in the fictional landscape as a sailing race unfolds in the Venetian panorama, unleashing an ocean of terror "chopping" Curran everywhere: "a number of sailing boats were taking advantage of the favourable weather; there was probably a race in progress. On the table where the smiler sat, a few little white cards were assembled. Curran felt suddenly terrified and left the hotel right away" (175).

As in some of Spark's other novels, the characters in *Territorial Rights* are each remarkable for some skill or vice—and there are artists. Curran successfully sells his paintings to his friends, while Lina paints fishermen on a bridge (indistinguishable between Paris or Venice) which nobody buys. Her lack of artistic creativity and vision is emphasized when she visits St Mark's to admire the mosaics and "said out loud, in English, to a group of five ardent Americans, 'We have also in Bulgaria'" (162). Lina's conception of art production is contrary to the dynamic and dexterous crafts accomplished by the Scottish novelist.

Territorial Rights is mainly set in Venice, as are many other books, but Spark transforms the city, creating a unique narrative stage by altering its topography, resisting its charms through language, overlapping spatial realms, and subtly absorbing the vigorous power of Venetian architectural masterpieces to model her novel's solid framework and to impregnate its form. Significantly, as the curtain falls in the novel's concluding paragraph, space becomes the narrator's object, highlighting the role of Venice, or—as Stannard has suggested in the passage previously quoted—the novel's central character (Stannard, 432).

Spark leaves the Venetian scenery as she found it, ready to stage similar episodes to be performed by the continuous flux of strangers and sojourners, some of them temporarily accommodated at the Pensione. Evidence of past crimes and sins remain buried, haunting the beautiful surface, where the city still preserves her maidenhood caressed by Neptune's (unhealthy) waters and where, as ever, ordinary life strives for gain and growth. On high, in an aura of venerability and—like the novel itself—of perfect artistic execution, the mosaics remain witness to human folly, shaping each sojourner's image which, in turn, will contribute to the slow formation of the immense, abstract mosaic of human nature, driven to evil and yet susceptible of redemption.²³ Although *Territorial Rights* is not categorized among her most acclaimed works, Spark was well aware—unlike Lina's cousin and boyfriend Serge—"that the same story that can repel can also enchant, according to the listener" (59).

Universidad de La Laguna

23 Furthermore, the mosaics also foreshadow Spark's metafictional novel *Loitering with Intent* (1981), in which Quentin Oliver's name evokes an anagram of an Olivetti qwerty-keyboard mosaic.