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## **RECONCILING THE DIVIDED SELF IN MURIEL SPARK'S THE MANDELBAUM GATE**

**Keywords:** *Holy Land, Israel-Palestine, novels, self, identity, division, reconciliation, boundaries, Jerusalem, Catholicism, Judaism, religion, Englishness.*

**Abstract:** *In the novel *The Mandelbaum Gate* Muriel Spark presents a protagonist, Barbara Vaughan, who has many similar characteristics to herself, and who, haunted by feelings of disjunction and split identity, seeks to examine her sense of self on a journey to Jerusalem, a city divided between two hostile countries at the time the novel is set in the early 1960s. In this paper I examine how the various oppositions within the protagonist's personality (Catholic-Jewish, intellectual-passionate, etc.), which are initially presented in terms of conflicts (conflicts which are also present in a parallel fashion in the outer world), are reconciled, and what this reconciliation means in terms of whether the self must choose between unity and diversity, or whether both are possible simultaneously. I argue that Muriel Spark approaches the problem of the reconciliation of the oppositions in Barbara's self from two perspectives, the existential and the religious. I suggest that in Spark's vision, while both an existential and a religious approach are able to lead towards a resolution of Barbara's internal conflicts by encouraging a movement in her away from preoccupation with her self and towards an orientation to the outside, the existential approach is contained within the religious approach, because the religious perspective, as well as recommending the same orientation towards the outside of the self as the existential perspective, also provides a sense of direction more specific than an outward direction, in terms of an orientation towards the supernatural. Spark presents a dynamic resolution in which a love for others allows the protagonist to overcome contradictions in her self, affirm her personal history, and experience the material and spiritual elements of her journey as compatible.*

Muriel Spark in her 1965 novel *The Mandelbaum Gate* presents a protagonist, Barbara Vaughan, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, who closely resembles herself in the many divisions and conflicts of character which she exhibits. Barbara Vaughan's fictional journey to the Holy Land takes place at the same period as a similar journey that Spark herself made, and Spark presents Barbara's journey as a confrontation with and effort to resolve the many divisions in Barbara's self, divisions in ethnic identity, religion and personality. Like Spark, Barbara is a Catholic convert with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish English parent, and Barbara is also shown afflicted by a conflict between the intellectual and passionate sides of her personality. The choice of Jerusalem as the focus of the journey and of the novel reinforces the theme of divided identity, as the city is divided in some of the same ways as Barbara's own self, as well as Spark's.<sup>1</sup> The casting of the journey in the light of a pilgrimage, that is, of a religious journey, and the way that the journey is taken at a point of crisis in Barbara's life, suggest that she is seeking a resolution of her conflicts, and the novel does indeed show her forging a reconciled vision of her self during the course of her journey.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this paper will be to discuss the divisions in Barbara's self, sometimes with reference to those in Spark, and the way they are represented in the novel,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Walczuk 77, Cheyette 63.

<sup>2</sup> See Whittacker 70.

as well as the way they are reflected and paralleled in the Holy Land's, and particularly Jerusalem's, split identity, and then to examine what form the sought for reconciliation of divisions in Barbara's self takes, and whether this reconciliation requires a cancelling out of oppositions, or whether the disparate elements can be conserved in harmony. In discussing the reconciliation I shall argue that Spark employs both existential and religious approaches, but subordinates the first to the second.

A sustained thematic in the novel is Barbara's split ethnic identity, a modified, and in some ways, simplified, version, of Spark's own. Spark herself had a father of Scottish-Jewish background, and was born in Scotland, but had an English mother, whereas Barbara has an English-Jewish mother and an English father, and is born in England. So Spark has simplified Barbara's identity compared with her own by taking out the Scottish element and creating a straightforward Jewish-English opposition. The Jewish side of the family is English-Jewish in that most of the relatives described seem to be born in England, but a continental origin is indicated in the Germanic syntax of one of the elderly relatives. The fact of the ethnic difference between the two sides of the family is supported by accompanying differences, including the religious difference, the Jewish side of the family being religiously Jewish, and the English side of the family being Anglican. I shall discuss the religious aspect further below. A contrast is also presented between the urban character of the Jewish family, who live in Golders Green, a Jewish area of London, and the rural identity of the English family, who live in Worcestershire, a county in the West of England. In addition the Jewish family is presented as intellectual, whereas the English family is sporting. Just as the ethnic division is related to Barbara's religious identity, it also connects with her sense of opposing character traits, which I shall explore further below.

Spark introduces Barbara's divided background in the novel's second chapter, which she calls "Barbara Vaughan's Identity", during which Barbara is pictured sitting on a wall on Mount Tabor, believed to be the site of the Transfiguration,<sup>3</sup> reminiscing both about her journey in the Holy Land up to that point, and about events before the journey, including scenes from her childhood. The childhood scenes consist of memories of holidays spent divided between her two sets of relatives, the Aaronsons in Golders Green, and the Vaughans in Worcestershire. Barbara attends a boarding school as a child, and her father has been killed in a riding accident, whereas her mother has moved abroad. Barbara emphasizes, in a conversation recalled with an Israeli friend, Saul Ephraim, in Jerusalem, that she wanted each side of her family to be aware that she had another side (Spark 37). So Barbara's strategy of maintaining her link with both sides of her family and not choosing either, at the same time gives her a certain outsider status in both sides.

Barbara's recalling of her childhood holidays with the two sides of the family is prompted by her recollection of her experiences during her trip up to that point, especially of a day spent with a Polish-Israeli guide who has been driving her round notable sites in Israel. During the drive the guide questions her on her identity, and she feels defensive (Spark 27-9). Barbara, like Spark herself, is a Catholic convert, and the guide interprets Barbara's having chosen Catholicism as her having opted for her gentile side. When Barbara says that she is half-Jewish, the guide notes that as her mother is Jewish she is simply Jewish, not half-Jewish, according to Jewish law. In the light of this observation by the guide it is interesting to note that Spark gave Barbara a Jewish mother whereas Spark herself had a Jewish father. This complicates Barbara's situation with respect to Spark's to the extent that Barbara could have opted to consider herself religiously Jewish without conversion, a possibility not open to Spark. This perhaps emphasizes that Barbara has made a deliberate choice to be a Catholic, both of her parents' religions having been open to her. Barbara tries to explain later, in conversation with her friend, Saul Ephraim, that to her being a Catholic is not a rejection of her Jewish ancestry, and that she sees Catholicism as

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<sup>3</sup> Kermode 276 notes that Mount Tabor, through the idea of the transfiguration of the body, represents the idea of religious depth behind the modern world.

containing an important Jewish element (Spark 37-8). In fact Spark's presentation of Barbara's childhood attendance of Anglican Easter and Jewish Passover can be seen as a kind of rehearsal of a Catholic Easter, Sproxtton (33) seeing the Passover ceremony as an anticipation of Barbara's later participation in Catholic Eucharist. Barbara also mentions to her friend Saul Ephraim the coexistence of the two testaments in the Bible (Spark 26). What would be less clear about Barbara's choice from an Israeli point of view than from a British point of view is that Barbara has not chosen the religion of her gentile relatives, that is, Anglicanism, but has in fact adopted one which is that of neither group of relatives, and one which, in Britain, gives her a minority status, just as adopting Judaism would have. So Barbara reinforces the outsider status she has by virtue of her Jewish-gentile parental background by choosing the religious identity which in post-reformation Britain has arguably been regarded as the most alien.<sup>4</sup> Barbara also has difficulty explaining to non-Catholics her hesitations about marrying Harry Clegg, an archaeologist she has met in England, prior to the journey to the Holy Land, and who, as he has already been married and divorced, would need an annulment to be able to marry Barbara in the Catholic Church, and it is not clear if he will be able to obtain one early in the novel.

The issue of Barbara's possible marriage to Harry Clegg is closely linked to her general sense of having a divided personality. One side of her personality is a cautious, intellectual side. She is described as having been formed intellectually in an academic way: "Barbara's intelligence has come to maturity in the post-graduate tradition of a great university's English department." (Spark 22) She selects facts carefully to fit into a particular point of view or perspective, like a thesis-writer (Spark 23), but this attitude proves insufficient to cover her needs: "All it meant was that her habits of mind were inadequate to cope with the whole of her experience, and thus Barbara Vaughan was in a state of conflict, like practically everyone else, in some mode or another." (Spark 23) Barbara has cultivated a restrained and sensible look to reflect this side of her personality, and this leads to the kind of reaction exemplified by Freddy Hamilton, a British diplomat and important character in the novel: "His first impression had been of a pleasant English spinster ..." (Spark 16) This appearance of Barbara's is likely also to have contributed to the conviction of Miss Rickworth, her colleague at the girls' boarding school, that Barbara has no intention of marrying, and that they will retire together. There has never been any explicit agreement on this, but Barbara finds herself unable to bring up the subject of her possible marriage to Harry Clegg with Miss Rickworth (Spark 45), and this dilemma contributes to her sense of crisis which results in her trip to the Holy Land.

The side of Barbara's character which is in conflict with her intellectual, restrained side is her passionate side. Barbara has long been aware of this element in her personality, which she associates with her Jewish side, without being sure why (Spark 43), but it comes to the fore and provokes a conflict in her when she meets Harry Clegg, falls in love with him, and conducts an affair with him while she is staying with English cousins of hers, on her mother's side. Her cousins' failing to notice that anything is happening, despite the fact that the affair is conducted partly in their house, frustrates Barbara, who both realises the distance between her own passionate nature and her cousins' complete lack of such a nature, and also the fact that she outwardly appears like them. She reacts, after a naive comment by one of the cousins, who has noticed Barbara and Harry together, but does not suspect a serious attachment, by realising "that her self-image was at variance with the image she presented to the world." (Spark 39) and goes to look at herself in the mirror to try to see how she outwardly appears: "Her hair was drawn back tight, her face was thin and smooth, her blouse and skirt were neat. Everything was quite neat, prim and unnoticeable." (Spark 39) While she realises that the enigma of "this deceptive, ascetic, virginal look" (Spark 39) together with a hidden passionate nature is part of what attracts Harry to her, just as she is attracted to his outsider status as an academic of working-class origins (Spark 40-2), she also has an

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<sup>4</sup> See Poitou 19, who identifies Catholicism in England as almost constituting the other "par excellence".

uncomfortable feeling that she might be a “hypocrite” (Spark 39). So by developing an outer appearance which only represents one side of her emotional nature, the non-romantic side, she then, when she finally does want to marry, feels inhibited in explaining the new situation to those, such as her English cousins and Miss Rickworth, who have interpreted her according to her outward appearance, and, in the case of Miss Rickworth, built expectations on it.

Barbara reaches a sense of crisis and impasse in her identity which she tries to escape by making a summer journey by herself to the Holy Land, but there are a number of reasons for her choice of destination. The Holy Land relates both to her Jewish heritage and her Catholic confession, and in addition to this her fiance Harry is working at the Dead Sea Scrolls site, near the Dead Sea, in what was then Jordan, so there is a possibility for her to visit him there, although this in fact never happens. However, the very dividedness of the Holy Land at this period, and of Jerusalem, which is the focal point of the novel, is emblematic of Barbara’s personal divisions. At the time the novel is set, in the early nineteen-sixties, the Holy Land is divided between Israel and Jordan, with what is now the West Bank and East Jerusalem being part of Jordan. The border runs through the middle of Jerusalem, putting the Old City on the Jordanian side, and the only crossing point in Jerusalem is a checkpoint called the Mandelbaum Gate, not a real gate like the gates of the walled Old City, as the novel points out, but something more makeshift, which has since disappeared: “hardly a gate at all, but a piece of street between Jerusalem and Jerusalem, flanked by two huts...” (Spark 303). West Jerusalem, in which much of the early part of the novel is set, is almost surrounded by the border, which, however, is not clearly marked, leading to possible danger for those who stray too close to it (e.g. Spark 171). The holy sites are divided between the two sides, with Nazareth, Mount Tabor and the Sea of Galilee, for example, on the Israeli side, whereas the Old City, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, site of Crucifixion and Resurrection, and Bethlehem, and many other sites are on the Jordanian side. As in the example of the Mandelbaum Gate itself, Spark tries to show both the contrast and the underlying unity between the two sides of the country and the city.<sup>5</sup> So, for example, while on the one hand Jewish people are not allowed to enter the Jordanian side, and even the word “Israel” must not be uttered in Jordan (Spark 11), there is an awareness in the novel of the two sides having recently both been undivided as part of the British Mandate of Palestine, as well as in earlier stages of history. Despite the absence of Jews in Jordan, there are Arabs in Israel, and Spark weaves a particular Arab family into the novel, the Ramdez family, putting the father and a daughter, Suzi Ramdez, Barbara’s Jordanian guide, in Jordan, but a brother, Abdul, in Israel, and showing that there is considerable communication across the border between them, despite the fact that this is not allowed. Barbara finds that although she cannot admit to being half-Jewish in Jordan if she is to enter at all, admitting it in Israel does not always elicit a positive reaction, as seen in the case of the Polish guide, as her conversion to Catholicism is not understood. In terms of her religious pilgrimage, she finds that on both sides most people are not Christian, so do not share her interest in the Christian shrines in the same way, once again leading her to need to explain herself, but the fact that perhaps more of the important shrines are on the Jordanian side (Spark 20) encourages Barbara to risk making the crossing, motivating the action of the second half of the novel.

*The Mandelbaum Gate* is a novel about the reconciliation of divisions, and I am going to approach discussion of the way Spark creates a reconciliation in Barbara from two points of view, the existential and the religious. The novel transforms in the middle, after the first four chapters, from a novel of split identities, with a limited amount of action, mainly consisting of reminiscences and conversations, into an adventure novel, an adventure set in motion by Barbara’s decision to enter Jordan from Israel in order to continue her pilgrimage. Barbara’s experiences and behaviour during this part of the novel, together with her decision on marriage with Harry, and what follows from this, form the existential

<sup>5</sup> Malin 107 notes that the Mandelbaum Gate is a case of unity underlying division in the novel.

resolution of Barbara's crisis of identity. The existential side to the resolution is closely connected to the religious side, which I shall discuss afterwards. That there is an existential perspective is perhaps hinted at in the novel by Barbara's recollecting Miss Rickworth's discussing "the doctrine that existence precedes essence" (Spark 154), but this type of Heideggerian existentialism may be contained by, rather than exclude, a religious understanding in the form of a Balthasarian Catholic philosophy based on the idea of essence as movement out of the self,<sup>6</sup> and I shall argue that in the novel the existential perspective elaborated by Spark is in fact contained within a religious frame of this kind.

The adventure part of the novel starts with Barbara's decision to enter Jordan to continue her pilgrimage, despite warnings that if her Jewish side is discovered, she could be suspected of being a spy, especially since she has been to Israel first. The novel's second most prominent character, Freddy Hamilton, the British diplomat, meets Barbara in the Old City, on the Jordanian side, on the same day she has entered. He convinces himself that she is in danger, and needs to be rescued, and takes her away from her convent-hostel in the middle of the following night, and arranges for a Jordanian woman, Suzi Ramdez, to take her round the holy sites in disguise in traditional Arabic costume. The initial flight from the convent-hostel during the night, during which Barbara almost wants to be caught so that she can explain to the nuns that she is not only the quiet, reserved single person they have taken her for (Spark 152-3), first gives her a feeling of having unified the oppositions in her personality, expressing the paradoxes and eccentricities already internal to her English identity ("unselfquestioning hierarchists, anarchistic imperialists, blood-sporting zoophiles, sceptical believers" Spark 164) and bringing together other polarities in her self ("a Gentile Jewess, a private-judging Catholic, a shy adventuress" Spark 164). On further reflection, during her pilgrimage in disguise in Jordan with her guide Suzi, she arrives at a deeper understanding of how her escape from the convent-hostel symbolizes the way she was living before her journey to the Holy Land: she relates to Suzi "how it now seemed that she had been living like a nun without the intensity and reality of a nun's life." (p278) Thus Barbara's escape from the convent-hostel does not represent a rejection or devaluation on Barbara's part of the celibate life, or the Church, as some commentators have argued<sup>7</sup>, but rather Barbara explains here that she had been presenting the outward image of someone celibate in her previous life, but had not adopted celibacy as a spiritual choice, and was therefore living in contradiction. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe (84) describes this situation that Barbara has been living in with Miss Rickworth as a "non-sacramental" celibacy, which means a life directed inwardly, towards herself, and not towards another like a nun's or a married person's. From an existential point of view Barbara has discovered that looking outside herself is the key to resolving her internal conflicts, as she acts, and loves, as a whole, whereas static introspection leads her to fall apart.

There is already a hint earlier in the novel about how this turning out from oneself towards the outside is the solution to the introspective conflicts of the self, and how for Barbara her relationship with Harry is a means for her to begin to do this, when, still sitting on Mount Tabor, she reminisces about Harry and, in feeling love for him, feels her crisis of identity as irrelevant: "She suddenly felt to be insignificant the business of being a Gentile and a Jewess, both and neither, and that of being a wolf in spinster's clothing ... The point was, he was entirely lovable, to her..." (Spark 47). Barbara's liaison with Harry has nevertheless brought her into conflict with the discipline of the church and presented her with a dilemma as she tries to determine what she will do if Harry cannot obtain an annulment of his previous marriage, so that she cannot marry him in the Church. Barbara has managed, with a struggle, to repent for the affair, although she is not sorry for falling in love with Harry. The ultimate solution the novel offers to the dilemma is paradoxical and difficult to interpret. Barbara's earlier decision for before her journey that she would not marry Harry outside the Church (Spark 44) changes once she is in the Holy Land, and,

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<sup>6</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Poitou 20.

before she crosses from Israel to Jordan, she telephones him while he is in Rome pursuing the annulment to tell him that she has decided that she will marry him anyway, whatever the outcome (Spark 181). However, in the event, the annulment, which was looking difficult to obtain, becomes readily obtainable as a result of a complex and unlikely train of events, which involves Miss Rickworth, who has come to Jerusalem in search of Barbara, and met and fallen in love with Suzi's father, trying to take revenge on Barbara for abandoning her by forging a Catholic baptismal certificate for Harry, who does not know if he was baptised or in what church, in the mistaken belief that this will make the annulment impossible, whereas it facilitates it, and Barbara and Harry may marry in the Church. A key to the meaning of the solution seems to reside partly in the statements she is reported as making when the news of the successful obtaining of the annulment arrives. She says, as she has elsewhere, "I would have married you anyway. But it would have taken courage to continue being out of the Church. It's the keeping it up I was afraid of." (Spark 244) This suggests that going through with the marriage outside the Church might not have been a successful long-term solution, as she might have felt compelled to leave Harry for the Church at some point. She soon afterwards adds: "With God, everything is possible". (Spark 244) This statement almost puts events in the light of a favourable intervention of Divine Providence, as if Barbara has been rewarded for a generous, if flawed from a disciplinary point of view, impulse, by a providential ironing out of the disciplinary obstacle.<sup>8</sup> Then, towards the end of the novel, Spark seems to put Barbara and Harry's marriage in perspective by describing it in positive but not rapturous terms: "Barbara and Harry were married and got on fairly well together ever after." (Spark 303) This very moderate description of their happiness suggests that the novel is not positing romantic fulfilment as the ultimate goal to be aimed for, which indicates that the romantic sphere must be seen as subordinate to the spiritual sphere in the novel, and that Barbara's "fairly" successful marriage is a step in her spiritual journey, training her in turning outwards from herself, but not its destination.<sup>9</sup>

Spark's deemphasising of the significance of Barbara and Harry's successful marriage towards the end of the novel, as well as the fact that the journey to the Holy Land is presented as above all a pilgrimage, suggest that it is the religious perspective which is the ultimate frame of interpretation for the novel. In fact, the idea that Barbara's relationship with Harry represents love, but not the ultimate love, is hinted at earlier in the novel, when Barbara, on Mount Tabor, recollects that, when she had confessed the love affair to a priest, she had tried to excuse herself by saying "It was a love-affair" and the priest had responded with "Yes, well don't pretend it was the Beatific Vision." (Spark 46) This exchange points to the idea that human love, while valid, takes place within a wider framework, and that once the self has escaped from obsession with itself by directing itself towards another in human love, it is on its way to its ultimate goal, which from a Catholic point of view is the relationship of the human self to God. Spark gives Barbara an opportunity to state in her own words the way she sees human relationships belonging within a wider religious perspective, rather than being a separate sphere, when, in conversation with her guide Suzi during the Jordanian leg of her pilgrimage, Barbara defends her tendency to talk of profane matters between visits to the shrines unlike other pilgrims of Suzi's experience:

Well, either religious faith penetrates everything in life or it doesn't. There are some experiences which seem to make nonsense of all separations of sacred from profane – they seem childish. Either the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart. (283)

So the religious perspective provides a kind of umbrella in the shade of which the complexities of Barbara's life are unified into a single meaning, as well as an aimed for, but not yet arrived at, destination,

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Caporaletti 300, who sees Providence as rewarding Barbara for her spirit of independence.

<sup>9</sup> Sproxton 40 argues that marriage would not bring Barbara as much "scope" as her faith.

on the way to which human relationships are a stage on the journey, a journey which has built on and thereby justified all the disparate elements in Barbara's personality.

As discussed in the early part of this paper, Spark describes a self, Barbara, similar to her own self, and characterised by complex divisions in terms of ethnicity, religion and personality. These divisions, however, in the context of an existential movement out of herself in love and adventure become grounds on the basis of which she can move rather than obstacles. The novel presents her love for Harry combining her passionate and intellectual sides, and her Catholicism as connecting with her Jewish and English sides, and her whole complex of qualities as uniting in her historical self, which is necessary for her spiritual self to emerge, just as the historical Jerusalem is a necessary part of Jerusalem's spiritual meaning. Thus the solution to Barbara's conflict of identity effected by Spark is one of a reconciliation within the self, a reconciliation which allows all the seemingly contradictory facets to subsist, but to subsist in a dynamic state, one in which the self turns away from itself towards others, human, and, ultimately, divine. Just as Barbara's multiple facets of identity turn out not to be contradictory when she turns away from herself in love, her human and divine loves turn out not to be contradictory, and the earthly and spiritual spheres are not contradictory with each other, as long as the first is treated as leading to the second. It is, according to Spark, a journey out of itself, from inner to outer, from self to community to the divine, which reconciles the self with itself.

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