Introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition
by K. M. Newton (2014)

DANIEL DERONDA, first published in 1876, is George Eliot’s final novel. It centres on the figures of Gwendolen Harleth and the eponymous Deronda, whose growing identification with the Jewish cause and the establishment of a Jewish homeland drives much of the plot. Their stories, separate and combined, have divided critical opinion and make Daniel Deronda Eliot’s most controversial work.

The novel departs from her previous fiction in being set during the mid-1860s, close to the time in which it was written. It takes place close to the passing of the Second Reform Bill of 1867 when the vote was extended to a proportion of working-class men. No one could be sure of the consequences of such radical changes to the electoral system, changes which of course were being driven fundamentally by economic and cultural developments in society at large. The novel also alludes to major change taking place in Europe, particularly to the rise of Germany, and the question as to whether Britain would continue to be the dominant power in Europe and the world is implicitly raised. The texture of the novel is informed by the increasing power and influence of modern capitalism – what Thomas Carlyle called ‘the cash nexus’ – and by issues of the day such as colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, cosmopolitanism, and proto-Zionism which affect in various ways the lives of the characters.

One of the major departures from the dominant concerns of the Victorian novel is the focus in Daniel Deronda on Jews and Jewishness. Eliot had long had an interest in Jewish history and religion and also a recurrent concern for peoples subject to oppression. Her friendship with the Jewish scholar and supporter of the creation of a nation for Jews in Palestine, Emanuel Deutsch – generally accepted as the main prototype for Mordecai in the novel – greatly developed this interest. The English part of the novel with its focus on Gwendolen Harleth and her relationship with Henleigh Grandcourt has always been recognized as showing Eliot’s writing at its most powerful but the critical orthodoxy has been that the novel is seriously weakened by its Jewish part in which Daniel Deronda becomes increasingly linked with the world of Jews. In contrast to the vitality of the major English characters and scenes, Deronda and the world of the Jewish characters have been widely viewed as idealized or one-dimensional. F. R. Leavis in his discussion of the novel in his book, The Great Tradition (1948), went so far as to advocate that ‘there is nothing to do [with the Jewish element] but cut it away’ with the hope that ‘an actual great novel’ can ‘be extricated ... for separate publication as Gwendolen Harleth’. Later Leavis had to admit that cutting away the Jewish element could not be done without fatally damaging the novel.

Interestingly some Jewish readers had a perspective on the novel that was directly opposite to Leavis’s. It was widely read by Jews and among their responses was that, whereas the Jewish part was of great interest and importance, it was hard to discern what was of interest in the English part: ‘If someone were to excise from this story all the chapters which tell of these Gentiles who have almost nothing to do with its main theme and basic idea, and to leave only those chapters [concerning Jews], the story would lack almost nothing.’ The fact that its first British readers were primarily interested in the English part, especially Gwendolen Harleth, which remained the case for much of the twentieth century, and that some Jewish readers appeared to find only the Jewish part of interest, is relevant in itself to critical discussion. Eliot famously described the role of art in the following terms:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies ... Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.\(^3\)

Both sets of readers, British and Jewish, are confronted by worlds which initially may seem alienating or uninteresting to them, especially as the double plot appears to keep these worlds separate.

The double plot was a common feature of the form of the novel in the nineteenth century and is associated not just with Eliot but with

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numerous other novelists, such as Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy. What is particularly distinctive about the double plot in Daniel Deronda is the radical difference between the two worlds that are brought together within the one text, both in terms of content and style of representation, with the narrator writing in a different tone in the Jewish part with much less wit and irony. Achieving sympathy in Eliot’s sense of the word is not easy; it involves engaging with that which is other in all of its otherness, whether or not it is immediately appealing: ‘We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness.’

In Daniel Deronda readers are being particularly tested by being faced with an otherness many would rather ignore. But the otherness of the two worlds of the novel does not mean that they are not integrally connected in artistic and thematic terms.

Subjectivity and Psychology

Daniel Deronda breaks new ground not only in showing awareness of the social and political issues already mentioned, many of which are still potent, but also in its innovative representation of the personal and subjective lives of the main characters, Deronda as well as Gwendolen Harleth and Grandcourt. Though Eliot was always a psychological novelist, consciousness is explored with greater depth and thoroughness than in any of her other novels, anticipating psychoanalysis. Certain acts in childhood by Gwendolen, such as strangling her sister’s canary, suggest childhood trauma, and these feed into hysterical incidents such as her response to the painting of the dead face in Chapter VI when she is engaged in amateur dramatics, and her loss of self-control in Chapter VII when her cousin Rex Gascogne tries to elicit a response to his love for her, arising from the ‘sort of physical repulsion’ she feels ‘to being directly made love to’ (p. 58). The word ‘terror’ recurs in relation to her. The classic Victorian novel is moving into new territory, particularly evident in the relationship between Gwendolen and Grandcourt in which the darker side of sexuality is strongly suggested. His sexuality is evident from his having had four children by his mistress, Lydia Glasher. The very fact that Gwendolen married him in full knowledge of his previous life – having learned of his past from Mrs Glasher, and therefore having had the choice to reject him – deprives her of justifiable grounds for objecting to his demands on her as a husband. Her humiliation would be complete if Grandcourt could throw in her face the fact that she had chosen to marry him despite knowing about his past. She wrongly thinks that Grandcourt does not know of her meeting with Mrs Glasher, though he knows of it through his companion Lush – a weapon one feels he is keeping in reserve if she rebels. Her increasing loathing of him is palpable as she is unable to resist his dominance over her, made worse by the fact that it is psychological and not physical, and that she has to submit to him sexually is clear in the narrator’s disclosure of her fear of becoming pregnant.

The vitality of feeling Grandcourt possessed as a young man at the beginning of his affair with Mrs Glasher, whom he wants to discard, appears to have completely dried up so that his only pleasure in life is exerting his ‘mastery’ over others, a keyword in the novel. Though Eliot remains subject to Victorian constraints, it does not require much imagination on the part of the reader to conclude that Gwendolen’s having to submit to him sexually in the face of her loathing, might make his sexual satisfaction the greater and from her point of view be tantamount to rape. That repressed rage should generate murderous thoughts in her is easy to comprehend and can account for her inaction and passivity when he is drowning, which makes her feel indirectly responsible for his death, even confessing to Deronda that she is a murderess.

No human being, even a Grandcourt, is completely beyond redemption and therefore sympathy, and one of the functions of Eliot’s art in her novels is to disrupt readers’ expectations and make them question their assumptions. The narrator suggests that part of Grandcourt’s motive in marrying Gwendolen is an attempt to recapture the vitality of his earlier self which may not have entirely disappeared, or may revive, and Mrs Glasher’s claim that he ‘has a withered heart’ (p. 300) and Deronda’s view of him as a ‘remnant of a human being’ (p. 340) may be too unqualified. After Gwendolen reads the letter from Mrs Glasher shortly after her marriage to Grandcourt which causes her at the ‘sight of him’ to lose control so that she ‘screamed again and again with hysterical violence’ (p. 301), all hope for their relationship vanishes and the sadistic Grandcourt is soon reinstated. Ironically Grandcourt has precipitated this situation by his only failure to exert mastery when he is unable to force Mrs Glasher to hand over to him his mother’s diamonds which he

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4 Essays, 171.
had intended to give to Gwendolen directly and has to agree with Mrs Glasher's desire to send the diamonds independently to Gwendolen. This moment of weakness on Grandcourt's part allows Mrs Glasher to have her revenge on both him and Gwendolen.

Character is never fate in Eliot's fiction but always exists in interaction with social and cultural forces. Grandcourt is shown as a victim of his cultural context since he belongs to an aristocratic class that has ceased to have any significant social role or function. Although he may be a rather extreme example of upper-class decadence, the surname of Grandcourt's uncle and Deronda's guardian, Sir Hugo Mallinger, a very different example of the English aristocracy from Grandcourt, is indicative of his also belonging to a largely redundant class. He has lived an unreflective and undistinguished life on inherited wealth and property.

Gwendolen is a different kind of social victim from Grandcourt, having had no settled upbringing, her mother being forced to marry for prudential reasons after the accidental death of her first husband and so presenting Gwendolen with an unwelcome stepfather. Her expression of dislike for him together with her bouts of hysteria and her emotional fragility despite an apparent confidence in her power of ego hint that she may have suffered sexual abuse as a child, paralleling her later sexual degradation at the hands of Grandcourt. Having few viable options but marriage even before the loss of her family's fortune through speculation by their bank, and lacking the rigorous education or cultural opportunities which would have given her alternatives to the conventional choices open to women of her class, marriage to a rich – or potentially rich – man appears to be her only option, especially as otherwise she would have to become a governess and so lose class status.

Connecting Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda and Their Worlds

Deronda and Gwendolen, the major characters in the novel's two 'plots', are brought together in the opening chapter when he observes her gambling at the roulette table in Leubronn and in the next chapter anonymously restores to her the necklace she has had to pawn. This intense encounter establishes not just their relationship but that between the novel's two parts, even though for most of the time the two characters occupy their own spheres and only interact occasionally until their meeting in Genoa in Chapters LVI and LVII. At an abstract level they exemplify opposite tendencies, she driven predominantly by the ego and he by sympathy towards the other, but neither tendency is or can be totally dominant so that an imbalance and a continual tension persists. Even when the focus in the narrative is on only one character the tendency represented by the other remains implicit. Deronda has often been seen as embodying an ideal sympathy but he is well aware of the dangers of such an extreme position and rejects and finds 'exasperating' the Meyrick family's identification of him with the transcendence of the ego associated with the Buddha. His attraction to Mirah Lapidoth, whom he rescued when she was on the point of drowning herself, is implied here as he knows that at some point he will have to assert the interests of self over those of 'the other' in the form of Hans Meyrick who has also fallen in love with her.

The novel may be questioning the assumption that only if ego-tism and self-interest play no role can actions and decisions have moral authenticity. Deronda is most seriously disturbed when in his second meeting with his mother in Genoa she scores a palpable hit by being right about his being in love with a Jewish woman and insinuating that that is the real reason for his desire to accept gladly his Jewishness and to commit himself to the ideal of Jewish nationhood. Could he convincingly have denied that if the Jewish woman he rescued had been unattractive or vulgar, his response to his mother's revelation might have been very different? He remains silent in the face of her claim and can only resist by believing that her interpretation is a 'fixed' one which there is no point in opposing. All he can do is to continue to have faith in the credibility of his choices and actions knowing they may be interpreted plausibly as no less motivated by the ego and its desires than hers.

Though the reader may be expecting that the two main characters will have a romantic liaison since their interest in each other is clear, Deronda is drawn to Gwendolen against his will and better judgement: 'Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?' (p. 3). This uncomfortable sense of being subject to 'coercion' occurs at several points in the novel. There is sexual attraction in his reaction as is the case with almost every man whom Gwendolen encounters but Deronda is

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unusual in resisting it; it might have been more difficult for him to resist but for the fact that he has earlier met Mirah Lapidoth. Deronda is in a sense immunized against Gwendolen’s attractiveness though it does not provide total protection, especially since he believes there are insuperable barriers to any intimate relationship between himself and Mirah because her identification with her Jewish religion and culture would debar marriage to a Gentile.

Perhaps Deronda’s greatest piece of luck – and luck plays a central role in this novel – is that he meets Mirah shortly before his confrontation with Gwendolen. If it had been afterwards it is likely that Deronda’s life and the lives of other characters might have been very different: ‘I should have loved her, if—’ (p. 522). This is an instance of one of the more subversive undercurrents in the novel, that one’s whole life is likely to be shaped by a particular circumstance or timing of an event which may not be of great significance in itself but had it not happened one’s life would have been completely different. Another example, pertinent to Gwendolen’s life, is when Deronda passes Gwendolen and Grandcourt on the stairs of the hotel in Genoa, which makes Grandcourt determined not to let her out of his sight, precipitating a series of events that results in Grandcourt’s death and the freeing of Gwendolen from the nightmare of her marriage. If Deronda had not been on the stairs at that moment in all probability none of that would have happened.

Gwendolen and Deronda may seem at opposite poles, but oppositions are seldom total in Eliot’s writing. Both have been negatively affected – though their reactions are different – by experiences in their earlier lives, Gwendolen by the loss of her father and her unsettled life with her stepfather, Deronda by being cut off from knowledge of his origins and feeling unable to ask his guardian about them. Deronda fears there may be something shameful in his past, and he has to exercise severe self-control in order to deflect ‘even a silent admission of the sore that had opened in him’ (p. 143). Both characters therefore have to deal with different forms of alienation and respond in different ways: she wanting to dominate the world by force of ego, he aspiring to transcend egotistic drives through sympathy. And though action should be easier for Gwendolen, committed as she is to the ego and doing ‘just as she liked’ (p. 108), she finds she cannot completely ignore the claims of the other that arouse her sympathy, as is apparent in her encounter with Mrs Glasher when she spontaneously recognizes this woman’s greater right to be.

Grandcourt’s wife. Her sense of guilt after her marriage to Grandcourt when accused by Mrs Glasher of breaking her word, denying the claim of the other in favour of self, induces ‘a new spasm of terror’ (p. 300) in her.

A particularly important link is that neither Gwendolen nor Deronda feels that life in England has much to offer them. Gwendolen has no idea what to do with her life apart from marriage, about which she is continually negative, yet only marriage seems to offer an ‘agreeable guarantee of womanly power’: ‘to become a wife and to wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity’ (pp. 30-1). Sir Hugo has given Deronda the best education that England has to offer and he then spends time in Europe extending his education but he returns to England still without any sense of direction. Sir Hugo would support him in whatever career he chooses and tries to persuade him to go into politics but Deronda is not attracted by that. He develops a sense of being an outsider – like so many figures in literature since the Romantic period – because he suspects he is illegitimate, and in any case he can never be fully a member of the upper class. This gives him a critical perspective which makes him believe that he cannot find an authentic vocation in an English context.

Both Gwendolen and Deronda experience the emptiness of the life of the rich and the ruling class in general. The wealthy Mr Arrowpoint, for example, aspires to become connected to the aristocracy by using his money to marry into it through his daughter, Catherine, Grandcourt being his prime target. There is an uncomfortable parallel between the English upper class’s view of marriage and the sordid behaviour of Mirah’s father, Lapidoth, a gambling addict who virtually tries to sell her to a rich count: ‘You have had a splendid offer and ought to accept it’ (p. 183). Mr Bult, as part of a political class seemingly uninterested in anything except money and status, expects to gain a peerage and needs to marry for money; he tries his luck with the heiress Catherine, but is exposed as a philistine, as is apparent in his exchange with the musician Klesmer, who belongs to a ‘cosmopolitan’ (p. 203) European tradition of high culture which the English upper classes have little knowledge of or interest in. The narrator does not play down Klesmer’s comic aspect but his ‘outburst … on the lack of idealism in English politics, which left all mutuality between distant races to be determined simply by the need of a market’ (p. 202), is clearly to be taken seriously.
Gwendolen is especially unfortunate in that there seems no way forward for her. Despite her initial confidence that she can make an impact on the world through force of ego, there is no content to her aspiration, in contrast to that of Deronda’s mother who became an opera singer. She admits she is ‘discontented with things’ (p. 95), like Deronda, but her ignorance does not lead to a productive questioning of the reasons for that discontent or to consider what can be done about it. Her class status is accepted without question and she has no conception of the material basis of her family’s wealth through involvement in colonialism, nor does she know that the family fortune has been put in the hands of the bankers Grapnell and Co. so that she and her family can live off the investment income, which has had disastrous results because of the ‘wicked recklessness’ (p. 10) of Mr Lassman’s speculation. What has been called ‘casino capitalism’ is clearly not only a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Deronda is also associated with invested capital, his ‘sort of contemplative mood’ being compared to that ‘more common in the young men of our day … in whom the unproductive labour of questioning is sustained by three or five per cent on capital which somebody else has battled for’ (pp. 154-5). The novel subversively connects gambling in the casinos of Leubronn, Lapidoth’s addiction to gambling, and the gambling of the respectable classes who rely on banks to invest and speculate with their capital.

First-time readers of the novel may expect Gwendolen and Deronda to go on to have an adulterous affair given the closeness of their emotional relationship. The nineteenth century is notable for a number of significant novels written by men in which the main character is a woman who aspires to a freer and more fulfilled life by escaping the controls that women have been habitually subject to in the past. These characters are linked in their rebellions against marital constraints through engaging in adulterous relationships but their attempts to find self-fulfilment fail disastrously. Gwendolen Harleth is strongly related to these characters and is probably the only female protagonist created by a nineteenth-century woman writer who has a literary power comparable to the female protagonists of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, or Fontane’s Effi Briest, who can all be seen as being in the vanguard, even if unconsciously, of women’s encounter with modernity and the freedoms it seems to offer. But conventional society remains resistant. Gwendolen may not rebel against the constraints on women in her time but her mental resistance is clear: ‘We women can’t go in search of adventures … We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining’ (p. 111). Though she is not technically an adulteress, she is associated with adultery, acting the role of Hermione, the queen accused of adultery in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. She hates her husband’s subjugation of her and resists his determination to make her conform to his notion of respectability and has an intense and psychologically intimate relationship with another man. Grandcourt suspects her of being capable of adultery in the conventional sense, showing up unexpectedly in Chapter XLVIII when she and Deronda are alone together in intense conversation. If Deronda had not been committed to another woman, an adulterous relationship between them would have been possible and even likely, as he acknowledges several times the power of her attraction for him.

The novel suggests that adultery is fraught with danger for women. They are vulnerable to male exploitation and subject to social rejection, as is illustrated from within the novel by Mrs Glasher who, having left her husband and cast aside social respectability to live with Grandcourt, is finally discarded in favour of a younger woman. When Gwendolen meets her she sees her as a terrifying personification of a woman’s fate: she ‘felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, “I am a woman’s life”’ (p. 126). Mrs Glasher’s fate would indeed have been ghastly if she had not had some good luck, benefiting from Grandcourt’s bad luck when Gwendolen fails to throw him a rope when he is drowning, so that her son by Grandcourt becomes his heir.

Adultery would have had a very personal resonance for Eliot since she herself was in an adulterous relationship with the writer and critic G. H. Lewes, with whom she lived for twenty years even though he was already married. Perceived as a ‘fallen woman’, she risked ruin as social rejection could have made publication as a writer impossible. But she refused to be defined merely by sexuality and banished any mention by her friends and acquaintances of anything that drew attention to her illicit relationship, regarding her relationship with Lewes as a marriage of equals and quite as valid as any conventional marriage. She was admittedly fortunate that the man she chose gave her total support and cleverly managed her writing career, using his connections with the publishing world to get her first two works published under a pseudonym so that she was estab-
lished as a writer before her writing identity as a ‘fallen woman’ was exposed. Eventually she triumphed over social condemnation, even if not in the eyes of respectable women. She refused to use her own life as a model for her female characters and, notoriously, they mostly fail or have to settle for less than their potential had promised. But to suggest she could be emulated by women in general would surely have been irresponsible given how exceptional her life was, associated with both scandal – though able to rise above it – and literary genius. Gwendolen Harleth may be the character who becomes closest to her since she survives, if precariously, and still has the potential to do something meaningful with her life in the future even if it is not clear what that will be. This makes her significantly different from Eliot’s other major female characters, and suggests that Eliot may have been more hopeful about women’s futures than Flaubert or Tolstoy or Fontaine without underplaying the difficulties.

Gambling and Luck

Gambling is criticized in the novel but this does not imply that it has no role to play in life, as Deronda acknowledges while recognizing that it is always ethically problematic: ‘There are enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another’s loss: – that is one of the ugly aspects of life’ (p. 281). The role of chance and luck in life is a consistent theme in Eliot’s fiction and though the Jewish plot may appear improbable from a conventionally realist literary perspective, improbability is highlighted for a reason in the novel since it calls into question the assumption that it is not reconcilable with realism and empiricism.

Perhaps the major problem for readers who expect the plot of the Jewish part to be made realistically probable is Deronda’s suddenly turning out to have the Jewish origins that enable him to marry Mirah and fulfil Mordecai’s vision, which may appear to take improbability too far as well as being too convenient to be artistically satisfactory. But one needs to take account of the fact that Deronda, despite being critical of gambling, in effect becomes a gambler. He gambles – while recognizing improbability and having no confidence that he will be a winner – that Mordecai may be right about his being a Jew. He knows it is much more probable that he is Sir Hugo’s illegitimate son, but his gamble is not completely irrational any more than it is irrational for gamblers to bet on an outside chance rather than the favourite. To gamble is also in his self-interest since Mordecai offers him the ideal he has been looking for that could give his life direction and meaning, and improbability needs to be established for Deronda’s gamble to have any literary credibility. Gamblers who bet on an outside chance usually have some motive that may not be unreasonable for doing so and it would be odd if Deronda’s gamble had absolutely no rational basis. Are there signs that might be evidence of Jewish origins? He is dark which is characteristic of Jews but also, the narrator points out, of Italians. Significantly, before he becomes seriously involved with Mordecai’s ideas, an old Jew in Frankfort (who turns out to be Kalonymos, the friend of his grandfather) suspects he is Jewish, as does Mordecai when he first meets him in the bookshop when he is trying to trace Mirah’s family; his separation from his Jewish family at the age of 2 would suggest he would have been circumcised in accordance with Jewish practice (a subject not mentionable in a Victorian novel), but there are other reasons, mainly medical, for circumcising infants. Thus there are signs, but they are ambiguous.

He admits that if his gamble fails, he would not be the only loser. Yet though he risks shattering the dying Mordecai if his gamble does not succeed, in his contact with Mordecai it could be argued he should have laid much greater stress than he does on the unlikelihood of his having Jewish parentage, rather than going on to learn Hebrew before he has any proof of Jewish origins. And not only would Mordecai’s dream be shattered if Deronda turns out not to be a Jew but an inadvertent consequence of Deronda’s rescue of Mirah and his continued support for her is that she has fallen in love with him and he with her, though neither knows the other’s mind, despite her belief that he is an upper-class Gentile. Mirah has made it clear she is wholly committed to Judaism and she is undisturbed by religious customs which to outsiders such as the Meyrick sisters seem to place women in an inferior position to men, such as where they are placed in the synagogue. But her love for Deronda can only be realized by her breaking with her religious and racial heritage, so that her love has the potential to create mental anguish.

That potentiality becomes real when Grandcourt drowns in Genoa and Hans Meyrick jokes that this will be ‘rather uncommonly lucky’ for Deronda, since he is ‘a lucky fellow in being there to take care of her’ (p. 611). Meyrick thinks, and Mirah fears, that Deronda would marry Gwendolen if she were free, which leads Mirah to turn on Meyrick ostensibly because that would separate Deronda from
her brother. But her unstated fear is that she herself would be the loser and this fear leads to a mental crisis. That Mirah has to go through this experience changes her from being someone totally at one with her Jewish identity to developing a more critical frame of mind; she questions Mordecai’s idealistic view of the world in their exchange about the story of the Jewish maiden and the Gentile king at the end of Chapter LXI. This suggests that she is misread as the passive female stereotype critics have sometimes taken her for. Mrs Meyrick claims that it is in ‘her nature … only to submit’ (p. 187) but she does not submit to the will of her father, fleeing from him and the count her father wants her to marry, and in contrast to Gwendolen, who though ‘she did not mean to submit’ (p. 191) eventually does submit to marriage with Grandcourt, adapting to circumstances in a drastic change of mind. One should also note that though the epigraph to the novel, ‘Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul’, most obviously applies to Gwendolen, it is also appropriate for Mirah in her experience of jealousy: ‘It was as if her soul had been steeped in poisonous passion by forgotten dreams of deep sleep’ (p. 616).

That both Gwendolen and Deronda are gamblers is another link between them and also connects the two parts of the novel, both in terms of plot and thematically. But while Gwendolen is the kind of gambler who is convinced she will be a winner, Deronda thinks he has no such expectations, though the consequences of losing are as serious for him as for her. While gambling and luck play important roles in both their lives, she is continually a loser and he seems continually to win. This may appear to be another imbalance at the centre of the novel, but gambling by its nature is unbalanced. It is inseparable from luck and their interaction continually creates winners and losers, without desert necessarily being involved, and even if Deronda may be theoretically aware that there cannot be winners without losers, he only engages with the consequences of that after he discovers for certain that he has become a winner. Though Deronda himself, Mordecai, and eventually Mirah emerge as the clear winners from his gamble, the major loser is Gwendolen and from this point on Deronda’s good luck becomes an ethical problem for him. He is forced to confront existentially the moral dilemma that good luck for him is bad luck for another. He will inevitably have to desert Gwendolen, having found a vocation that has no place for her and that will necessitate his leaving England. The force of the moral dilemma becomes clear and overwhelmingly difficult for him to deal with in Genoa after Grandcourt’s drowning when Gwendolen suffers the most severe mental crisis as she brands herself a murderess. How can he leave her to return to England and Mordecai and Mirah and adhere to his plan to go to Palestine when this fragile woman may have a complete mental collapse or even attempt suicide? His struggle with this ethical dilemma in their scene together in Genoa after the drowning is one of the most powerful episodes in the novel.

Interpretations of the scene have generally read it as Deronda selflessly trying to help Gwendolen, with critical attention being generally focused on her, but there is ambiguity as to whether his concern is for her or whether he is acting in his own self-interest motivated by his need to escape from the orbit of her suffering and her extreme dependence on him. He tries to convince her that she did not murder Grandcourt—‘Great God! … don’t torture me needlessly. You have not murdered him’ (p. 581) – apparently concerned as much about the effect of her being a murderess on himself as on her if it were true. He claims that she could have done nothing that would have saved him as Grandcourt must have been afflicted with cramp, a rather less persuasive explanation than that of the fishermen who rescued Gwendolen who believe that Grandcourt drowned because he could not swim. Persuading Gwendolen to accept his version of events may help her to overcome her mental turmoil and gain some control over her feelings but it will also allow him to leave her with at least some assurance that she is in a safe state of mind, something that the reader may doubt. His greatest fear is that he will find it impossible to extricate her from her dependence on him. After he leaves she succumbs to ‘hysterical crying’ and believes she is ‘a banished soul’ (p. 591).

When they next meet in England his fears for her have not abated and he believes that ‘to withdraw himself from any appeal of hers would be to consign her to a dangerous loneliness’ and to experience the ‘cruelty’ of rejection. Nevertheless, ‘He was obliged to risk that’ (p. 650), in effect to gamble again and trust to luck that no harm will come to her. The reader may recall that Gwendolen’s fam-

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6 See e.g. the reading of this scene in Alexander Welsh, George Eliot and Blackmail (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), and David Carroll, George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
ily is ruined because Mr Lassman(n) ‘risked too much’ (p. 195). Is relying on luck acceptable ethically? Would Deronda’s decision to leave Gwendolen despite his anxiety about its possible effect be morally justifiable if he succeeded in furthering the ideal of Jewish nationhood or would it be morally unjustifiable if he failed or if Gwendolen committed suicide? Is ethics itself called into question if it cannot be dissociated from gambling and luck? These are the questions raised in the novel. Deronda’s anguished grappling with them in his meetings with Gwendolen undermines the conventional view of him as an ideal character who always knows what is right.

His anguish reaches its climax in his final meeting with her when he must tell her that he is leaving England for good and will marry Mirah. Guilt is the inevitable consequence of the imbalance between himself as winner and Gwendolen as loser and his own role in making her a loser: ‘She was a victim of his happiness. “I am cruel too, I am cruel,” he repeated, with a sort of groan, looking up at her imploringly’ (p. 679). Yet there is no escape from such dilemmas and the decisions they necessitate. One has a responsibility to oneself as well as a responsibility to the other and there is bound to be conflict. Whatever choice one makes there will be guilt. There also may be more than one other to consider. If Deronda had chosen to stay in England as long as Gwendolen needed him and was at risk, the victim would have been Mordecai as, close to death, he would not have seen the beginning of an attempt to realize his vision. When Gwendolen later writes to Deronda in a tone that gives him some grounds for hoping that she can survive without him, this letter is ‘more precious than gold and gems’ (p. 682) as his happiness in life would be spoiled if she came to serious harm without him. But he is in an ethical situation in which what is the right thing to do is not clear and any decision will involve risk and uncertainty as to outcome. He may have been less confident after reading her letter if he had known that following their last meeting, ‘Through the day and half the night she fell continually into fits of shrieking’ (p. 680), which parallels her experience after reading Mrs Glashe r’s letter: ‘He [Grandcourt] saw her pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror’ (p. 301).

Yet the open ending means one must defer judgement as to who are winners and losers. It may be that Gwendolen will come through her traumatic experiences and overcome her demons on the Nietzschean principle that whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. And is Deronda wasting his life in trying to realize Mordecai’s vision? At the time the novel was written, the creation of a Jewish nation in Palestine would have been generally regarded as a pipe dream. Deronda also does not seem ideally suited to the role of nation-builder, being more of an intellectual than man of action. His preparations for his quest have been seen as somewhat comic—‘Sir equipment for Eastern travel’ (p. 682) —but perhaps that is not entirely unintended. Luck will certainly play a role in both Gwendolen’s and Deronda’s futures. But the open ending stretching into a future beyond the time of the novel’s writing makes it impossible for the reader, the narrator, or the author herself to know who will be lucky or unlucky, successful or unsuccessful, winner or loser.

Daniel Deronda and the ‘Novel of the Future’

Eliot was interested in and sympathetic to Wagner’s concept of a ‘music of the future’ though admitting that her ears were not quite ready to receive his efforts to bring it into being. Daniel Deronda may be seen as Eliot’s attempt to write a ‘novel of the future’, and bearing this in mind may enable one to counter some of the objections that have been levelled at the novel in terms of its art. Wagner may even have had some influence on the linguistic texture of Eliot’s fiction. She was interested in the role of the leitmotiv in his operas, and the linking of images and especially the use of recurrent words in her later fiction may owe something to this Wagnerian device. Unlike any of Eliot’s other novels it opens in medias res, a literary device associated with epic poems, which has the literary benefit of starting with an arresting scene that is central to the whole narrative, requiring a later flashback to the narrative’s temporal beginning. Not only are beginnings called into question since, as the epigraph to Chapter I states, ‘No retrospect will take us to the true beginning’ (p. 3), so are endings. Since the reader is denied the firm foundations of a definite beginning and an ending that provides closure – the conditions that are normally necessary for any secure judgement of the characters’ lives and their determining choices – states of consciousness tend to become at least as significant as actions and behaviour.

This may explain the very first paragraph, which is probably unique in nineteenth-century fiction. Narrator and narration seem to disappear in favour of direct and unmediated access to a conscious-

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7 See Essays, 100.
ness, a technique that later became identified with the modernist novel. Though Eliot’s anticipation of interior monologue suggests an awareness of an alternative or a supplement to a narrative controlled by a narrator, it is not used again in the novel. It may be that it was too radical a departure for a novel written in the 1870s but it does obviously point to future developments. Among other things Daniel Deronda is a reflection on realism in fiction. The narrator is represented as a novelist writing a novel about real people and events; in other words like the characters and situations of the novel the narrator is inside the text, and the penetration of characters’ minds derives from the imagination of the novelist rather than from the fact that the narrator is ‘omniscient’. This means that readers of Daniel Deronda can read the narrator as well as the narrator’s narrative and might therefore legitimately question or criticize the narrator’s perspective on or interpretation of reality. What does reliability or prejudice mean if there is no ‘truth’ independent of interpretation? Eliot’s narrators are constantly interpreting, often quite directly and personally. The reader may disagree with or take a different view from the narrator not because the narrator is wrong but because there are multiple perspectives on reality.

Where one might argue that the reader has particular scope to take a different view from the narrator is in regard to the ending in which – despite the unpredictability of the future – Deronda appears to have fulfilment in love and a life-defining vocation while Gwendolen is left virtually bereft. The narrator has suggested several times that if circumstances had been different, Deronda and Gwendolen would have had a passionate relationship, one which almost certainly would have been intense and sexual. But he chooses Mirah since he feels his attraction to Gwendolen as ‘coercion’. His foundational desire to become ‘an organic part of social life’ (p. 305) and to devote his life to a noble cause that will serve the good of others is not reconcilable with the égoïsme à deux of passionate love. His love for Mirah is different; he identifies it with ‘protectiveness’ and ‘sober gladness’ and thinks ‘it was enough of personal joy for him to save her from pain’ (pp. 680-1). He keeps from her Meyrick’s unrequited love and the intensity of his past relationship with Gwendolen, nor does Mirah tell him of the jealousy that exposed the passionate side of her nature, so that she is able to explain away and no longer feel threatened by her past fears in regard to Gwendolen. Their relationship may be protected by such suppression but there must be some loss of intimacy. Deronda’s social ideal and his attempt to realize it would benefit from the support of a traditional Jewish wife and Mirah is content to take on this role. They are both prepared to sacrifice the intensely personal, impulsive, and passionate side of the ego to serve a cause that transcends the individual self and its desires. The reader may respect and admire Deronda’s idealism and his sympathy for and devotion to an ideal that aims to benefit others but it is also open to the reader to draw the conclusion that Deronda does not have it all at the end – even if there is a positive outcome to his quest – since he has had to sacrifice passionate love. Gwendolen, though in despair, has potential at the end if she is able to recover from her traumatic experiences. She may find in the future the passionate relationship – which Deronda denied her – with another man, though it seems unlikely that Rex Gascoigne, who is still in love with her, could be an adequate substitute for Deronda. Or like Deronda, who promises to maintain contact with her from a distance, she may find a vocation equivalent to his within English culture, and there are many female models in her social world who could inspire her, Florence Nightingale being the most obvious.

Allusion, Intertextuality, Allegory

One of the novel’s major departures from conventional realism is its dependence on previous narratives. The plots and themes of novels by Scott, Austen, and Dickens are self-consciously employed by the narrator in recounting the ‘history’ of Gwendolen and Deronda in their social and cultural contexts, along with some interplay at a more limited level with texts such as Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale and As You Like It. The ‘Deronda’ plot draws particularly on Scott’s Waverley and to a lesser extent on Ivanhoe, the latter being directly alluded to in the text. There are clear parallels with Pride and Prejudice and to some extent with Mansfield Park in the ‘Gwendolen’ plot, and there are considerable borrowings from Dickens’s Little Dorrit in both plots. What links these novels by perhaps the three major nineteenth-century British novelists preceding Eliot is that they combine realism and different forms of romance, all of them engaging in various ways with an underlying empiricist perspective on reality but also, for Eliot, at risk of evading it or senti-

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mentalizing it. Romance gives them great imaginative scope and power but they often deviate from a materialist view of reality in the process. Whereas romance elements generally may not trouble readers of Scott or Austen or Dickens because they do not expect the world of empirical fact to be wholly adhered to, in *Daniel Deronda* such empirical fact – that is the world as perceived through historical, sociological, psychological, scientific perspectives – cannot be set aside and needs to be acknowledged. Darcy as the ultimately perfect upper-class gentleman in *Pride and Prejudice* is replaced by the less than perfect Grandcourt, and ‘coincidences’, extremely evident in *Little Dorrit*, in *Daniel Deronda* do not suggest a metaphysical presence in the world. Instead they suggest a reality that takes account of Darwinism with its emphasis on chance and luck in the evolutionary process and the inevitability of unexpected or improbable events bringing good fortune to some and bad fortune to others. In other words the narrator as constructor of the narrative aims to give greater impact and scope to the realism of the novel by employing elements and devices associated with romance, including the ‘sensation’ novel, but integrating themimaginatively into a fictional discourse that remains grounded in empiricism.

A notable feature of the novel is the greater emphasis on probability rather than on fact. The word ‘probable’ with its various cognates is recurrent in the text. But improbability is not logically at odds with realism; as the epigraph to Chapter XLI states: ‘It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen.’ Probabilities govern the characters’ thinking about their lives and hopes. Both Gwendolen and Deronda, by being particularly conscious of probability, as a result feel they exist in a world that is unpredictable. The shift in thinking about the world and reality with its emphasis on probabilities rather than ‘facts’ or likelihood inevitably leads to the heightening of a sense of instability, reflecting the impact of Darwinian ideas and their implications in the period in which the novel is set. *Daniel Deronda* is an implied critique of conventional realism on the grounds that such a conception of realism undermines itself by the restrictions and exclusions that have to be in place to give it credibility, such as rejecting the improbable, banning coincidence, avoiding any disproportion in the relation between cause and effect. Yet all of these will feature to a greater or lesser degree in every person’s life. Rather than using conventional realism to try to make the improbable believable, in the Jewish part of the novel conventional realism is, to a considerable extent, set aside in a plot that obviously draws on romance and even fairy tale. Much criticism of the Jewish part of the novel has been based on the assumption that there is a mismatch with the canons of conventional realism. But recognizing the limitations of these canons and not adhering to them fully does not mean that empiricism is set aside but only that the real is mediated through aspects of the style and some of the devices associated with romance narrative.

Eliot in all her novels was also attracted to allegory as a means of signifying on more than one level, most obviously in *Silas Marner* and *Romola*, and this is perhaps further developed in *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot’s greatly increased interest in Judaism led her to explore in some depth Jewish myth and mysticism, indicated in the text by allusion to Cabbalism: ‘[Mordecai’s] imagination had constructed another man who would be something more ample than the second soul bestowed, according to the notion of the Cabbalists, to help out the insufficient first’ (p. 400). But typically the narrator places Mordecai’s Cabbalism in its social and psychological context. His being ‘morbidly alive to the effect of a man’s poverty’ (p. 400) and having ‘certain incapacities of his own’ (p. 400) as well as knowing he has not long to live, suggest there is an element of compensation in his having ‘constructed another man’ to continue his work. Eliot, however, though not a believer, admired religion and myth as powerful imaginative constructions incorporating human ‘truths’, her thought in this regard being influenced by the philosophy of Feuerbach. Jewish mysticism and myth (especially the golem legend – pertinent to the development of Deronda – in which that which is unformed and unshaped becomes animated into a being who defends and protects the Jews) allows her to build into the novel layers of meaning comparable to the exploitation by major writers of the past of classical and biblical myth together with their theological and philosophical subtexts.9

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Politics and Proto-Zionism

Daniel Deronda has turned out to be a ‘novel of the future’ in a more direct sense, perhaps playing some part in bringing the future about. In the last decades of the twentieth century negative criticism has mainly shifted from issues like the supposed discordance between the English and Jewish parts to the politics of the novel. In an essay first published in 1979, ‘Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims’, Edward Said attacked Daniel Deronda for being complicit with European imperialism and colonialism by its apparent support for the colonization of Palestine by European Jews. For Said, proto-Zionists like Eliot had essentially embraced the ideology of imperialism and colonialism by viewing Palestine ‘as essentially empty of inhabitants’, and what he conceives to be Eliot’s politics has been developed and often taken much further by a considerable number of later critics influenced by post-colonial theory, with the result that Daniel Deronda has become a highly controversial novel politically.

One could argue against Said that proto-Zionism in its nineteenth-century context was fundamentally different from European colonialism in that the desire to colonize Palestine was not motivated, like colonialism generally, by economic exploitation but by the desire to have a material base for Jewish cultural identity and to escape the anti-Semitism which was pervasive to a greater or lesser degree throughout Europe. But Said is on stronger grounds in pointing out that the Arab presence in Palestine is not specifically mentioned in the novel, and he argues that this implies that Eliot in colonialist fashion thinks it can be ignored. Looking at Eliot’s writing as a whole, however, especially the last chapter of her final work, Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879), entitled ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’, it is clear that she was well aware that colonization almost invariably results in conflict with existing inhabitants and can have horrific results, but recognizes also that it can lead in at least some cases to the eventual emergence of new and viable nations. Though colonization is always morally problematic for Eliot, one can infer that she believed that to reject it absolutely, as it has been ubiquitous, would be to condemn human history as a whole.

Eliot certainly admired some writers who wrote from a politically committed position, notably Harriet Beecher Stowe. But she was worried when she felt that art was compromised in the process. It would therefore be contrary to Eliot’s aesthetic for Mordecai to be idealized and a mere spokesman for her, as Said claims. It is significant that in proclaiming and defending his vision, he does not want to acknowledge problems that may be encountered and uses his rhetoric to sweep them aside: ‘Difficulties? I know there are difficulties. But let the spirit of sublime achievement move in the great among our people, and the work will begin’ (p. 451). The obvious difficulty is that Palestine is now largely Arab. One can argue that the novel should have spelled out these difficulties for the reader, but one can also argue that they are nevertheless implied for the discerning reader. Mordecai’s political limitations are suggested by his drawing a parallel between the creation of a Jewish nation in Palestine and ‘the beginning of the great North American nation’ (p. 453) yet ignoring the dire consequences for Native Americans which Eliot refers to in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’.

Political readings have tended to see Deronda as at one with Mordecai but the art of the novel is careful to bring out their differences. What is the product of vision for Mordecai will be a gamble for Deronda that will require luck to succeed. For Mordecai, Deronda must be a Jew to become his ‘born again’ (p. 455) soul, but Deronda is already committed to the ideal of a restored Jewish nation while he still thinks the chances of his having Jewish origins are remote. One should also note that his commitment to Mordecai is not just intellectual, because of his agreement with his ideas, but also emotional because of the fundamental humanity Mordecai showed in forsaking his journey to the East – which would have been the defining experience of his life – in order to return to his distressed mother in London, human sympathy being finally more powerful than his prophetic vision. An intriguing question remains for readers

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of the novel: is it likely that Deronda would have chosen to devote himself to Mordecai’s ideal even if his Jewish origins had not been confirmed or if it turned out he was not a Jew? One might note that Eliot herself has streets named after her in Israel even though she was a non-Jewish atheist.

Though the novel’s support for Jewish nationhood is clear, its dialogical aspect should also be noted, with Klesmer being especially central to this in offering an alternative ‘cosmopolitan’ perspective to Mordecai’s vision of nationhood and Deronda’s revisionist commitment to Mordecai’s ideas. Deronda’s mother’s graphic picture of what Judaism means for ambitious women also has independent force in the novel: ‘I wanted to live out the life that was in me’ (p. 527). She rejects Jewish (or any kind of) tribal identity, comparing it to the binding of Chinese women’s feet. It is almost certain, however, that Klesmer would see her form of operatic art as too much a vehicle for the ego. The arguments of the assimilationist Jews in their debate with Mordecai in Chapter XLII and who are content to be both English and Jewish are treated with respect, and Hans Meyrick’s ironic scepticism is given free rein in his letter to Deronda in Chapter LII. But Klesmer’s cosmopolitanism is the most serious alternative perspective. Unlike Deronda he has no desire to be ‘an organic part of social life’ nor any interest in Mordecai’s proto-Zionism. His Jewishness seems no more important to him than his German or Slavic roots, and he apparently believes the ‘fusion of races’ (p. 203) is inevitable and for the best. Only art is recognized by him as having a defining force. He would be as happy to be in St Petersburg as in London, and marries an English heiress, Catherine Arrowpoint, who is like him in attaching no value to class status or inherited wealth (though he appears to have no guilt about making use of it) and whose life is also centred in art. But is cosmopolitanism sustainable without a vocation such as art? The life of the rootless Lapidoth, addicted to a life of gambling and committed almost totally to self-interest, raises doubts and may suggest that the great majority of people, even someone like Deronda who is also cosmopolitan in several respects, have a psychological or emotional need for the particularity and partiality of a group identity of some kind.

The major issue associated with the novel’s proto-Zionism for critics like Said is that it entails colonization which inevitably will create conflict with existing Arab inhabitants so that there will be winners and losers. But for Eliot one cannot avoid difficult choices and in this case she chooses, like Deronda, the Jews. But it is implied that if conflict arises there is always the hope of future reconciliation. The countries which are seen as models for a new Jewish nation in the novel are Britain and especially America, both created by colonization and eventually accommodating many different peoples, including the defeated or marginalized original inhabitants. The American Declaration of Independence, if its fundamental principles are taken literally, promises that all of its peoples, even Native Americans and slaves, will be included and equal. There is no indication that Deronda or even Mordecai thinks that such an ideal should play no part in the founding principles of a Jewish nation in Palestine.

But of course the political reality that has followed the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 has been one in which there has been virtually continual conflict between Jews and Arabs. Reading Daniel Deronda now, one cannot help but be affected by that context, with critics and political opponents of Israel or at least of its recent policies attacking the novel on various grounds, accusing it of ‘Orientalist’ assumptions, supporting modern Zionism, defending colonialism, stereotyping Jews, even of having an anti-Semitic subtext by seeking to rid Europe of its Jews through emigration, so that the focus on politics leads to the neglect of the novel’s literary achievement. One could argue that Daniel Deronda has been unlucky to be connected with a political controversy that necessarily interferes with responses to the novel in terms of its art. But writing a novel about a subject that potentially could influence the future in ways which were unpredictable was a risk and might even be seen as a gamble by Eliot, appropriate given the role of gambling in the novel. As the narrator of Middlemarch points out in chapter xlii: ‘Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?’ Opinion being still divided as to whether the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was good or bad for the world, as long as the situation in Palestine is one of political impasse, Daniel Deronda will remain controversial, but by the same token it is one of the few classic novels that is still directly pertinent to political and cultural issues now.