It occasionally happens that a book written to explain an earlier age takes on a new and startling relevance in a later one. This is the case with George Eliot’s last and most ambitious novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Published in parts between 1873 and 1876, the novel not only anticipates the creation of the state of Israel some seventy-five years later, it also supplies a vocabulary with which to talk about Israel’s situation as it has evolved into the present. It is a book that needs to be read by anyone interested in the moral difficulties facing Israel today and, more broadly, the difficulties inherent in any national movement as it moves from an ideal to a reality.

*Daniel Deronda* is a very long book—what Henry James would refer to as a “baggy monster.” It is full of moral speechifying and erudite detail and has a convoluted plot replete with melodramatic deaths and wonderful recoveries and coincidences. These elements were not a source of difficulty for the Victorian reading public. Victorians liked their novels long and preachy and full of Sturm und Drang. What was controversial lay in the nature of its hero. Daniel Deronda is an impeccable English gentleman who discovers midway through the action that he was born a Jew. At the end, he embraces his Jewish heritage, marries a Jewish woman, and leaves England to help establish a homeland for his people in Palestine.

The novel would be celebrated as a Zionist text. Ten years after its publication, Theodor Herzl credited it for helping inspire his call for a Jewish state in *Der Judenstaat*. In 1948, at Israel’s independence, Abba Eban extolled Eliot as “one of our first visionaries,” and, today, there is a street in every major Israeli city named for her.

By the same token, the novel would irritate many of Eliot’s non-Jewish contemporaries, who were put off by the idea of a
Jewish hero. Later, it would become a target for anti-Zionist sentiment, most notably from Edward Said, the literary scholar and pro-Palestinian activist. In an essay on the novel that has been anthologized with his political writings, Said points out how Eliot ignores the Arab people on the land that her hero goes off to settle and connects this to an imperialist ideology that, he says, renders invisible everything that falls outside of it.

Yet for all that Said constructs a powerful case against the novel, I suspect his heart is not entirely in it. He is too good a literary critic, his knowledge of Victorian literature and of Eliot in particular too nuanced, not to see how the book escapes his accusations of imperialist bias. Yes, it ignores the Arab world which was not palpably present to Eliot’s experience in the way that the Jews of the West End were. But, then, her aim, as she explained in correspondence with fellow reformist novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, was less to forward Jewish settlement in Palestine than to critique her native Britain: to reveal the moral challenges facing a powerful and prosperous nation with respect to a much-maligned people living within it. This is precisely the kind of critique that Said has engaged in for most of his career and that he may have originally learned from reading George Eliot. It is also a critique that can be used to understand better the moral challenges facing Israel today.

Eliot herself made an equation between the Jews and the British in one of her last essays. There are, she wrote, “specific affinities of disposition between our race and the Jewish.” A Jewish homeland, she postulated, may contribute “some added form of national genius and an added voice to the councils of the world.” Such words recall the original beliefs that many Jews first brought to their support of Israel. The Jewish state was to be not only a refuge for the persecuted of the Holocaust but also a contribution to world governance: a testing ground and a model from which humanity could repair some of the defects of past societies.

But in presenting the idea of a Jewish state, Eliot expressed an interest that was, as already noted, less foreign than domestic—less the means by which to explore the promise of a new nation (at the time, a purely hypothetical idea) than to measure how far England had strayed from its own original promise. Eliot’s concern, noted the critic Raymond Williams, “is with how one is to live in England today, but . . . she understood how far afield it
was necessary to go to begin to give any viable answer.” If we substitute modern Israel for Victorian England in this statement, we can see how the ground has shifted. How far afield must we go to know how to live in—or, for that matter, think about—Israel today?

Daniel Deronda consists of two interrelated stories. It is a measure of the problem that Eliot was addressing that they have often been viewed separately rather than together, as she intended. One story centers on a beautiful young woman named Gwendolen Harleth, a member of the British gentry, who has great expectations though little money. Spoiled by her mother and used to manipulating everyone else, she assumes that she can do the same with her prospective husband, a wealthy aristocrat, not realizing that he is a more adept manipulator than she is. No sooner does she marry than she realizes her mistake. The marriage becomes both a prison and a site of moral torture, and she is only released when her husband drowns under circumstances in which she is vaguely complicitous. At the end, she faces life with a new sense of humility.

The other part of the novel, or “Jewish portion” as it is referred to, deals with the story of Deronda, who slowly learns about his ethnic inheritance through a series of dramatic events. These two plots are connected through a relationship that develops early on between Daniel and Gwendolen. The opening scene has him observing her gambling at a casino in Leubronn, Switzerland. Although he has never seen her before, she attracts his gaze because her beauty and vitality seem at odds with “the uniform negativeness of expression” of those around her. Eliot claimed to be inspired to write this scene during a trip to Hamburg a year earlier, where she was struck by the sight of one Miss Leigh, the great-niece of Byron (and rumored to be his granddaughter) engrossed in play at the Korsaal: “It made me cry to see her young fresh face among the hags and brutally stupid men around her.” Deronda apparently feels the same way about Gwendolen and registers this in his look, which only spurs her to play more recklessly. Ultimately, she is forced to pawn her mother’s necklace, which he, in a gallant gesture, retrieves and returns. From then on, she views him as a moral judge and good angel—and implicitly as a potential lover.

But while the opening scene establishes a moral connection
between the two characters that will be sustained until the end, it also marks a romantic connection that will never be realized. Throughout the novel, Deronda serves as confidant and confessor to Gwendolen, but as she falls increasingly in love with him he becomes increasingly occupied elsewhere—with the Jewish girl, Mirah, whom he saves from suicide; with her brother, the sage and inspired Mordecai; and with the search for his origins, which, once discovered, lead to marriage with Mirah and their emigration from England.

As this synopsis should make clear, the novel is characterized by a certain thematic perversity. It establishes a relationship between two attractive young people of apparently similar backgrounds in the opening pages, then proceeds to thwart their union. The use of an unusual time sequencing in which the opening actually happens later than many of the key events supports this effect by making us think that Deronda is unencumbered when in fact he is already in love with someone else. It would seem indeed that Eliot establishes the coordinates of a relationship for the express purpose of disappointing not only Gwendolen but also the reader, who has been conditioned by the conventions of the English domestic novel to believe that these two characters are destined for each other. "All may come right in the end," persisted a contemporary reviewer, responding to one of the later serialized installments, "... Gwendolen ... is, by far, the more suitable wife for Deronda." The reviewer is reading the novel as though it were Jane Austen's Emma and Deronda, like Mr. Knightley, were bound to proclaim himself to the reformed heroine at the end. Henry James, an aficionado of perversity, would react more enthusiastically to the novel's resolution and adapt it to his own fiction. But James would also narrow the focus to concentrate solely on the moral gains of unrequited love. He would virtually eliminate the political component, so central to Eliot's work.

For, in fact, the reversal of the expected romance in Daniel Deronda is only a small part of a larger reversal that serves its political message. Daniel not only rejects the vivacious Gwendolen in favor of the meek Mirah; he also rejects a British society of unparalleled privilege and power in favor of a Jewish one that hardly exists at all except in a highly fragmented or hypothetical form. It is as though Oliver Twist had discovered he were the son, not of the British gentry, but of the Jew, Fagin.
Indeed, the passage out of Judaism and into Christianity is the master narrative of Western culture. It underwrites not just Dickens’ novels but the entire English literary tradition. Thus Jessica deserts Shylock for Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Rebecca sacrifices herself for a Christian lover in *Ivanhoe*. In *Daniel Deronda*, this narrative stands behind Deronda’s in his mother’s story. She, like previous literary heroines, ran away from her Jewish father’s house: “I was to care for ever about what Israel had been; and I did not care at all,” she explains to her son when they finally meet. “I cared for the wide world, and all that I could represent in it.” Although she chooses a life on the stage and not a Christian lover, as the conventional plot dictates, this still involves the rejection of her religion and her culture for an assimilated identity. She wants this assimilated identity for her son as well, which is why she has him raised as a British gentleman.

But Deronda is constituted differently from his mother—and from all previous characters in British literature. He rejects her gift of assimilation and moves in reverse of what she and his society have undertaken on his behalf. It is this reversal that constitutes the most ambitious and controversial aspect of the novel.

Deronda does not become a Jew through a divine visitation, nor, for that matter, through a simple “looking down,” as the critic Steven Marcus put it, to discover that he has been circumcised (inescapable as this fact might seem, it falls outside the purview of Eliot’s fictional universe). Instead, his assumption of Jewishness is a gradual process of awakening. He begins very much in the place that his mother had intended, wishing that his guardian Sir Hugo were actually his father and shying away from a stranger’s suggestion that he is a Jew. His feelings begin to change, however, as he passes through a number of fateful experiences. First, he saves Mirah from suicide and becomes her protector; then, he becomes interested in the teachings of her brother Mordecai, a Jewish scholar of enormous erudition and spiritual passion; finally, after learning about his birth from his mother, he meets with his grandfather’s best friend (the very man who had recognized him as a Jew in Zurich years before), who imparts to him his grandfather’s legacy.

The standard criticism of the novel is that the Jewish portion is unrealistic. Yet Eliot seems to have designed the events outlined
above precisely to combat the prevailing assumption that a
conversion from Christianity to Judaism would be unrealistic. We
see how difficult her task was and how limited its success by the
responses to the novel from her contemporaries. “I never did like
the Jews,” one lady is reported to have declared, “and I never
will.” Professional critics couched their reviews in esthetic terms
but displayed the same stubborn distaste: “Deronda’s acceptance
of Judaism as a religion is revolting; that is not what we are
proving; we are calling attention to a grave artistic fault.”

Another observed along the same lines: “the Jewish part of the
story is simply odd and inexplicable. It has nothing to do with the
main plot, which would move on quite smoothly if it was all cut
out . . .” This argument would be sustained into the twentieth
century with F. R. Leavis’ famous indictment of “the astonishing
badness of the bad half” (by which he meant the Jewish portion)
and his proposal “to extricate [the good half] for separate
publication as Guendolen Harleth.”

By the same token, a number of Jewish critics have taken the
opposite position, mirroring the mainstream view with uncanny
precision: “If somebody 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 which I have briefly referred to in this article, the story
would lack almost nothing,” wrote one commentator from the
Jewish press. An early translation into Hebrew actually included
only those portions in which Mordecai expounds his Zionist
ideals in a kind of extended rabbinical oration—what contempo-
rary British critics singled out as the weakest episode in the novel.

Both the British tendency to focus exclusively on the British
part and the Jewish tendency to do the same with the Jewish part
not only fail to take into account Eliot’s professed intention that
“everything is connected to everything else”; each also enacts its
own racist vision, eliminating the seemingly extraneous group
from consideration. Similar tendencies seem to be at work in
more recent views of the novel like Said’s, that accuse it of an
imperialistic agenda, and like the critic Ann Meyer’s, that accuse
Eliot of anti-Semitism in both her more and her less idealized
Jewish characters. Such readings have shifted the vocabulary
somewhat, but are only variations on the early partisan readings
quoted above.
That the novel has evoked such polarized response should alert us to something more complex in its message—something that may indeed transcend any single, sectarian reading. In fact, *Daniel Deronda* places two seemingly opposing sets of loyalties in delicate suspension. On the one hand, it supports the ideal of a distinct national identity (whether Jewish or British or, for that matter, Palestinian, if we accept the basically metaphorical aspect of Eliot's imagination). On the other, it advocates what had long been Eliot’s professed creed: a “religion of humanity” which preaches a dissolution of barriers between peoples—a willingness, above all, to be open to the other point of view. The greatness of *Daniel Deronda*, as I see it, lies in its understanding of the paradoxical nature of these loyalties and of the necessity of their mutual coexistence.

Eliot represents the Jew in *Daniel Deronda* as a dichotomous figure, adapted from conventional stereotypes circulating in her culture. In the popular lore of nineteenth-century society, Jews were at once linked to the past through their involvement with ancient rituals and beliefs, and, at the same time, tied to modernity, as displaced and scattered people able to adapt to and take advantage of change. Conventionally, both of these views carried negative associations. The one defined Jews as clannish and secretive, the enemies of progress and illumination; the other cast them as decadent or mercenary cosmopolitans (the tools of capitalistic exploitation in Marxist theory, for example).

In keeping with her overall strategy in the novel, Eliot reverses the moral charge associated with these stereotypes in her creation of Deronda, Mirah, and Mordecai. They combine the spiritual groundedness that a profound sense of cultural identity brings and, at the same time, the empathy and intellectual openness that comes with existing in the diaspora as outsiders to the culture in which they find themselves. In this respect, they embody the ideal that Matthew Arnold posited as a mix of Hebraic law and Hellenic light. Arnold associated this ideal with the best kind of Protestant identity, but it could just as well be a translation of Deronda's grandfather’s ideal of Jewish identity as “the balance of separateness and communication.”

Yet even as Eliot reverses the moral associations of the Jewish stereotype in her heroic Jewish characters, she also populates the novel with other Jews who conform more closely to the negative
stereotype. The pawnbroker to whom Gwendolen brings her necklace at the beginning of the story is described perfunctorily as one of "these Jew dealers [who] were so unscrupulous in taking advantage of Christians unfortunate at play!" In the same category is Mirah's father, an itinerant musician, who sells Mirah's talent for his own gain and precipitates her suicide attempt when he arranges to sell her to a foreign count to settle his gambling debts. Not unconnected with these two mercenary characters are the Cohens, the family with whom the saintly Mordecai lodges. They too are vulgarians, mired in material concerns (the little boy is depicted as already a savvy businessman). But Eliot spends more time exploring this family than she does the other, less savory Jewish characters in the novel. What she reveals is that the Cohens are not simply mercenary and vulgar; they can also be generous and warm. Deronda sees this when he visits them on the Sabbath. Suddenly, they appear in a more dignified light than they did when he engaged with them during the working day.

The crude and mercenary tendencies that the Cohens exhibit to the secular world reflect Eliot's awareness of the ways in which a dominant culture tends to see and to shape a minority culture existing within it. Such tendencies are both projections on the part of the perceiver and real qualities on the part of the perceived, who indeed become coarsened in having to survive in a hostile society. The dignity of the Cohens that Deronda glimpses on the Sabbath shows that the everyday view is not the whole story. For this family, the practice of their culture, though it occurs against the grain of the mainstream society and is largely hidden from it, allows them to maintain some core sense of decency. This glimpse of how a group affiliation can dignify and refine becomes an argument on behalf of Jewish nationalism (and of any nationalist movement, for that matter). It suggests that a national identity and by extension a national homeland offer unifying values that can rescue a people from the baser forms of temptation that degrade them when they must live on sufferance as a minority in another culture.

But Eliot would be simply forwarding a separatist political agenda if this were the extent of her point. For she also seems to be arguing that a nation without the capacity to open itself to difference will lose the very qualities that make a national identity
worth having. In other words, British citizens, for all that they may share in values and inheritance, will become monsters of entitlement and complacency unless they can see the dignity and decency of people like the Cohens.

The result of such inbred thinking is epitomized in the figure of Grandcourt, Gwendolen’s husband, a man who embodies the imperialist spirit that is at the root of nineteenth-century Britain’s moral malaise, as Eliot saw it. Far from gaining in personal substance from a long lineage, the stewardship of several opulent estates, and access to a plethora of refined pastimes, Grandcourt is instead made selfish and solipsistic. It is a measure of his combined brutality and entitlement that when he wants to kick his dogs, he has his servant do this for him.

If Mirah’s mercenary father is the extreme of the negative Jew in the novel, Grandcourt is the extreme of the negative Englishman. Taken together, they constitute the cultural impasse that the novel is addressing. For how does one begin to negotiate change and understanding in a world in which the outsider has been coarsened into a demon and the insider has been refined into one?

Eliot provides an answer, if it can be called one, in the form of two interconnected values: idealism and humility. These values exist in a kind of tension that replicates the tension of Jewish identity as both traditional and modern.

The idealistic goal that the novel subscribes to is Deronda’s ultimate goal to settle in Palestine and found a homeland for his people. His goal conforms to the elevated ideals that Israel espoused at its beginnings and that many Jews echoed in their support. This idealism is what made Daniel Deronda a sacred text to the early Zionists.

Unfortunately, it is a property of idealism that it cannot weather the wear and tear of everyday life. It is significant that the novel ends with Deronda’s journey to Palestine. We do not see him begin his work or even set up house with his new wife. In this respect, the nationalist enterprise in the novel resembles the more mundane, but no less idealistic marital enterprise that commonly marks the end of the Victorian domestic novel. “The novelist averted his eyes from married life as from the grave: perhaps he suspected a resemblance between them,” observes the feminist literary critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun. To follow the
heroine into marriage, she suggests, is necessarily to compromise
the ideal that the courtship plot establishes as the ultimate
reward. The same might be said for the nationalist plot if we were
to follow Deronda to Palestine. In Henry James's dramatic satire,
"Daniel Deronda: A Conversation," he addresses this point through
the voice of one of his characters, who tells her friends what she
thinks happens once Deronda and Mirah settle in the East: "they
had tea-parties at Jerusalem—exclusively of ladies—and he sat in
the midst and stirred his tea and made high-toned remarks. And
then Mirah sang a little, just a little, on account of her voice being
so weak." The speaker here is a self-professed anti-Semite who is
bent on deflating the idealized portrayal of the Jews in the novel
("when I think what a collection of noses there must have been at
that wedding!"). Nonetheless, her rendering of Deronda's life in
Palestine is not without a certain critical astuteness. For what
models does he have for forging his new life abroad except the
life he has known as a gentleman of leisure in England? For that
matter, what models did the Jews of Europe have who fled to
Israel in the wake of persecution? The societies from which they
came were in many respects highly advanced and admirable. This
helps account for their much-touted success in turning the desert
into green land: the technological expertise, not to mention the
idea of a green landscape, came with them from their countries
of origin. But another legacy of European civilization was the
engine of the Holocaust. And though the Jews who brought Israel
to nationhood sought to create a humane and democratic
society, the very exclusivity risked by forming a Jewish state
echoed the idea that had caused them to flee their original
homes. At the very heart of the idealistic enterprise was a source
of potential difficulty and discord.

This is not to dismiss the idealism behind the creation of a
Jewish homeland as wrong-headed. It is only to say that idealism
is not enough. It can be the source of inspiration for a new
beginning but it must be accompanied by constant vigilance and
by a general attitude of humility. The idea of humility is central to
Daniel Deronda, and indeed to all of Eliot's work. By humility she
means something more than tolerance. Tolerance is a willingness
to allow others to exist; humility is a willingness to be open to
others, with a disposition to learn and change. It is not so much
an abasement of self as an acknowledgment that one's own way
may not be the only or even the best way. It is Deronda’s general posture of humility that makes him receptive to Mordecai’s teachings and to the appeal of his Jewish heritage.

If Deronda expresses humility throughout the novel, Gwendolen must learn it. After her husband dies, she goes home finally prepared to devote herself to educating her sisters and being a companion and solace to her mother, a life she had once scorned. Feminist critics have seen this as a capitulation to a subordinate female role. But feminism has too fully indoctrinated us in the idea that the female position is necessarily the weaker one. In Eliot, though women certainly suffer handicaps and restraints by virtue of their sex, in some contexts they emerge as stronger in being more open to feeling and more willing to change than men. (Deronda is a feminine character in this respect, as some critics have noted.) Gwendolen’s position at the end of the novel represents less the humbling of a woman into her proper role than the humbling of a nation whose hubris threatens to subvert its greatest achievements. “Gwendolen,” as the critic Deirdre David has noted, “is her culture.”

Eliot’s career as a writer demonstrated an ever-broadening perspective and incorporation of “more life,” as Henry James would say. She began writing translations, moved to reviews and essays, and then to stories and novels. The novels then embraced progressively larger issues and more ambitious themes. Eliot preceded *Daniel Deronda* with what was generally considered her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, which focuses on the life of an English village as a microcosm for the human condition. Though highly critical of many aspects of English society, *Middlemarch* is nonetheless a thoroughly English work—it implicitly supports the assumption that being English is, all in all, a very desirable thing. *Daniel Deronda* takes issue with this conclusion. Set in a more contemporary time, it is concerned with disrupting the complacency of its readers and exposing the serious failings and limitations of the English nation.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot was concerned with easing the basically irreconcilable tension between national identity and universal brotherhood. That tension has not disappeared with the passage of time but has presented itself in new guises with new participants, or with old ones occupying new roles. Eliot’s novel itself
took on new meaning after its publication. Though applauded by Jews when it appeared, it was not initially viewed in Zionist terms. It was only with the Russian pogroms of the 1880s and, more urgently, with the Holocaust, that the book was seen as anticipating and forwarding the creation of a Jewish state. In other respects, too, it became prescient, and in ways Eliot could hardly have imagined. Deronda, at one point, is cautioned by his guardian Sir Hugo not to open himself too completely to empathetic response: “It is good to be unselfish and generous; but don’t carry that too far. It will not do to give yourself to be melted down for the benefit of the tallow-trade.” The words are a warning against excess humility and exaggerated trust. And the stark prescience of the imagery must make us shiver.

It is precisely to avoid such melting down as the Jews experienced quite literally during the Holocaust that the state of Israel was founded and vigorously supported by Jews around the world. That horror gave rise to the defiant assertion: “Never again!” And yet the opposite tendency, to harden into a weapon that can melt others into candles, is what any idealistic antidote, taken to its extreme, is liable to produce. What can one do but be open to the voice of the outsider even when it has become coarsened and ugly through continued exposure to the outsider role? The lesson of humility that Eliot preached to her own country in 1876 is the lesson that Jews now need to have the courage to preach to theirs.