

# Modernizing George Eliot

The Writer as Artist,  
Intellectual,  
Proto-Modernist,  
Cultural Critic

K.M. Newton



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*For Sandra*



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# Introduction

This study will argue that George Eliot stands virtually alone among British writers since Milton in aspiring not only to be a literary artist at the highest level but also to be an intellectual of the first rank who could engage through the medium of literature with the most significant cultural, ethical and political issues of her time. Most of these issues, such as Darwinism, colonialism and racism, the problem of moral choice in the absence of any metaphysical grounding for it, still play an important role in contemporary debates in the twenty-first century, which makes Eliot perhaps the most significant Victorian writer at the present time. Her primary aim was to embody her intellectual interests and concerns within her novels without compromising artistic integrity, thus unifying intellectual thought and art. I hope to show that this ambition was to a considerable degree successfully realized, largely through the adoption of innovative literary methods that anticipate those developed later by modernist writers.

Although Eliot's canonic status has been securely established since at least the middle of the twentieth century – and the numerous books and articles that continue to be written about her work indicate that academic interest in it shows no sign of diminishing – more than most canonic writers she has been subject to a wide range of critical questioning. A recent commentator on Eliot's 'critical heritage', Kathleen Blake, has remarked, 'I had not thought to find so much critical depreciation.'<sup>1</sup> Her reputation suffered greatly following the end of the Victorian era when she was identified with what were seen as the excesses of Victorian moralism and high seriousness, and for some commentators, especially those outside academia, this remains a critical issue and is seen as compromising the artistic credibility of her work. It has been suggested that this perception of 'high seriousness – perhaps solemnity ... can help account for the way in which modernist artists rejected her'.<sup>2</sup> Although Virginia Woolf famously described *Middlemarch* as 'the magnificent book that, with all its imperfections, is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people',<sup>3</sup> her admiration for Eliot as an artist was very qualified, and she placed little emphasis on anticipations of modernism in her fiction. The New Critics, with their formalist principles, showed little interest in Victorian fiction before the emergence of Henry James, for whom form, or more exactly a particular conception of form, was the most important aspect of serious fiction. They would have noted James's famous or notorious comment on *Middlemarch*, that it was 'a treasure house of detail' but 'an indifferent whole'.<sup>4</sup> Mark Schorer, one of the first critics to apply New Critical principles to the study of fiction, noticed the intricacy of *Middlemarch*'s construction but still found it wanting in relation to Jamesian criteria: 'The dramatic structure is not very taut, yet one feels, on finishing the book, that this is a superbly constructed work ... What makes it so is thematic rather than dramatic unity.'<sup>5</sup>

Critical perceptions were significantly changed by the publication of Gordon S. Haight's edition of Eliot's letters, seven volumes appearing in the mid-1950s and a further two volumes in 1978. This was a major scholarly resource and has underlain the great number of critical books and articles on her work that have been published in the latter half of the twentieth century, continuing into the twenty-first century. However, F. R. Leavis's study *The Great Tradition*, first published in 1948, in which Eliot, together with James and Conrad, was elevated to the highest rank of English novelists, is generally acknowledged as a major turning point in regard to Eliot's reputation. Leavis claimed that the moral dimension of her fiction was fully reconcilable with the highest artistic integrity, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s well-received studies by Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey defended the form of Eliot's fiction against Jamesian influenced objections.<sup>6</sup> Thus Eliot's status as a major novelist was fairly firmly established. This is not to say that all critical worries over form were fully allayed, for certain aspects of her novels still attracted negative criticism, such as the dominance of the 'omniscient narrator' or what was seen as an unresolved tension between a commitment to realism and an idealism that affected both the representation of character and plots which have been accused of imposing a moral structure on the world. Leavis was particularly critical of the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda*, which for him was flawed in terms of its characterization and plot, making the novel for him an artistic failure even though he judged the English part as among Eliot's greatest literary achievements, and this has led to *Daniel Deronda* generating more critical debate than any of Eliot's other novels.

With the emergence of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, Eliot's fiction again came under scrutiny, but the emphasis switched from form in the Jamesian sense to language. Her fiction was singled out as exemplifying the 'classic realist text' by certain British critics influenced by Roland Barthes' critique of realism.<sup>7</sup> It was argued that whereas Eliot's modernist successors radically interrogated the relationship between language and the phenomenal world, the fundamental assumption of the realist tradition of the novel to which Eliot was seen as belonging assumed that language passively reflected the world. The language of realism was thus complicit in maintaining the dominant ideology rather than questioning or undermining it. This view of Eliot had links with Marxist criticism, which saw her fiction as reinforcing bourgeois ideology.<sup>8</sup> This book will question the view that the language of Eliot's fiction operates in such terms, and it will be argued in particular that there are significant anticipations of modernism in her work, especially in *Daniel Deronda*.

The shift in criticism from the emphasis on form or language towards history and politics that took place in the later decades of the twentieth century, with feminist criticism, new historicism and post-colonial criticism becoming increasingly dominant, led to an increased scrutiny of the politics of Eliot's work. Many feminist critics saw Eliot as at best half-hearted about feminism and its political aims, and thus failing to provide in her fiction the hope and inspiration that many feminists saw as politically necessary.



Post-colonial-influenced criticism was particularly critical of Eliot and argued strongly that her writing was supportive of imperialism and colonialism, with *Daniel Deronda* and the final chapter of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', being the major focus of this claim.

Eliot has, of course, been defended against these attacks, but in this book a more radical position is adopted, namely that Eliot was a much more ambitious and experimental writer than critics have generally realized and more than any of her Victorian contemporaries anticipates significant aspects of writing in the twentieth and indeed twenty-first century in regard to both art and ideas. The final essays in particular explore links between her mode of thinking and that of Jacques Derrida, especially in relation to the ethical and political tendency of the later Derrida. If these Derridean affinities are taken into account, what many previous critics have seen as contradictions or incoherences in her work or in her thought can be seen as mainly derived from reading her as a writer who, in her approach to art, her philosophical outlook and her ideology, predominantly reflects her Victorian context. This book argues that Eliot's work cannot be contained within that Victorian frame, that her ambition as an artist and the complexity and range of her thinking in regard to philosophy, ethics and politics make her perhaps the only Victorian writer who can be seen as a fully modern figure. Indeed if the term 'modern' is extended beyond the twentieth into the twenty-first century, Eliot as artist and thinker in some respects even moves beyond most of her 'modernist' successors. This can be seen in the relevance of her work to recent theoretical discussion in which there has been particular emphasis on such concepts as identity, nationalism, colonialism and cosmopolitanism,<sup>9</sup> all of which are central concerns of her writing, especially in *Daniel Deronda*, which is why it is discussed at length in several chapters of this study.

The study has three main sections. The first section focuses on Eliot as an intellectual. Though critics have admired her intellectual scope she has seldom been seen an original thinker but generally as someone who borrows from a range of sources without making a significant contribution of her own. I shall try to refute this view. Eliot as an intellectual was a product of the dominance of German thought in the nineteenth century, and she deserves to be seen in that European context. The books she translated from German, Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, were among the most influential written in the nineteenth century, and Eliot's familiarity with German and European intellectual developments generally is evident to anyone who has read her essays and letters. Arguably European modernism, as distinct from its Anglo-American form, had its beginnings within German Romanticism, especially Jena Romanticism in which literature and philosophy were to a considerable extent imbricated, which made it significantly different from Anglo-American modernism. Writers and critics associated with the latter seem to have been largely ignorant of the European origins of modernism, especially the radical innovations of Jena Romanticism at both the level of literary practice and theory.<sup>10</sup> They tended to see twentieth-century literary

modernism as a radical departure from Victorian writing, perceiving the latter as comparatively unsophisticated, especially at a formal level. Such a view did not take into account sufficiently Victorian writers whose intellectual and philosophical roots were deeply European, notably Eliot whose knowledge of and interest in nineteenth-century German literature, thought and culture from Goethe onwards was probably unsurpassed by anyone, except possibly Carlyle.

As an intellectual she belongs, in my view, among the ranks of the major European figures, and I support this in the first three chapters by considering her intellectual contribution in three significant areas of cultural debate and controversy, where her analysis and power of critique were especially acute: Darwinism, the Byronic and Kantian moral philosophy. Eliot stands apart from many of her contemporary intellectuals by being almost as knowledgeable about science as she was about philosophy, psychology and sociology, and this gives her treatment of Darwinism particular authority. Darwinian theory permeates her writing and she was both thoroughly acquainted with it at the scientific level and cognisant of its subversive potential at a cultural level. I shall suggest that her critique of Darwinism is more powerful than that of any of her contemporaries. One distinctive feature of it is that it does not deny the validity of Darwinism on the grounds that a theory with such dangerous implications cannot or, at least, should not be true.

The Byronic, like Darwinism, also permeates her writing. Byron's sceptical view of the world, his elevation of the ego and rejection of limits or boundaries, inspired an alternative Romantic tradition, particularly in Europe, that was prepared to take scepticism, egotism and irony to an extreme. Though Eliot had no respect for Byron as a man, she was thoroughly acquainted with his work and was not unsympathetic to all aspects of the Byronic, being for example an enthusiast for the work of another writer associated with irony, Heinrich Heine (Eliot in her essay on Heine remarks that he had been 'proclaimed ... as the Byron of Germany'<sup>11</sup>) who is associated with 'Romantic irony', a type of irony first developed by Friedrich Schlegel, one of the main figures within Jena Romanticism. But the combination of egotism and scepticism that was inspired by Byron and influenced the thought of writers like Schopenhauer and Stirner needed to be confronted at an intellectual level. Like Darwinism, the Byronic is viewed critically throughout most of her writing, but her most sustained critique is in her dramatic poem of ideas, *The Spanish Gypsy*, a work which deserves critical analysis though it has been largely neglected. Eliot's critical treatment of the Byronic in its various aspects – emphasis on the ego, pessimism about life, the belief that values can be created purely on an individual basis – is the more powerful because, as with her critique of Darwinism, it is genuinely critical and does not invoke metaphysical ideas or an absolutist moral position.

Eliot is of course generally associated with moralism. But can she be legitimately seen as a moral philosopher, that is, as someone who does not only have moral views but is aware of philosophical argument and whose engagement with ethics is governed by a defensible philosophical perspective? Few previous critics have taken Eliot seriously as a moral philosopher and there

has been much criticism of her as being merely moralistic. This is especially the case in discussion of moral dilemmas such as that which confronts Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* after she in effect elopes with Stephen Guest. Though this episode is one of the most humanly powerful episodes in the novel I try to show that philosophy cannot be left out of account since Kant's moral philosophy underlies the debates between Maggie and Stephen. Eliot has great respect for Kant's ethical philosophy but she does not merely apply it passively. She engages with Kant on her own terms with her own ideas and deserves to be considered as a moral philosopher in her own right.

This raises a question that is often posed in regard to Eliot: does her intellectuality diminish her power as an artist? As I have suggested above, this is not a problem in a German literary and cultural context, but Anglo-American critics have tended to be unconvinced by her attempt to combine the two and in practice have often concentrated on one or the other: 'not until we learn to deal with her simultaneously in these two roles will we be able to do full justice to her work.'<sup>12</sup> She was as devoted to literature as art as she was to the play of ideas. For her the highest art fused the intellectual and the artistic, and this is what she tries to emulate in her fiction. In the chapters following the discussion of her in which the main focus is on her as writer/intellectual, I shift the emphasis to artistic aspects of her writing – narration, symbolism, formal experiment, radical allusiveness – and argue that in certain respects she anticipates twentieth-century modernism, self-consciously drawing on myth, particularly Jewish myth and mysticism in *Daniel Deronda*, as well as incorporating and adapting various elements from texts by her major predecessors. This may be seen as an anticipation of Joyce's use of Homer's *Odyssey* as the basis for the narrative structure of *Ulysses*, while at the same time, like Joyce, not abandoning realism at the level of 'story'. The creation of layered literary texts in which a realist representation of life interacts with myth, symbolism and allusion anticipates not only Joyce but also T. S. Eliot, and she would have been sympathetic to his aim of fusing thought and feeling in literature. *Middlemarch*, *Silas Marner* and especially *Daniel Deronda* are discussed in that context.

If, as I argue, Eliot's commitment was to the integration of intellectuality and art with formal experiment being central to that commitment, then this may provide a different critical perspective from the negative critique that emerged in the late twentieth century in which the critical climate was one in which literary interpretation, cultural theory and political issues tended to merge. Indeed Eliot is a particularly significant figure in this context, since for her art should not avoid engagement with the major cultural issues of its time, and the fact that such issues as imperialism, colonialism, racism, cosmopolitanism play a significant part in Eliot's writing has led to interpretations of her work in which the dominant focus has been political. A negative critique of Eliot was initiated by Edward Said in his brief discussion of her in his book *Orientalism*, which he later elaborated on in his essay, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', which saw her work as supporting Western imperialism and colonialism. This led to a considerable number of post-colonial critiques of her,

generally going much further than Said. These readings are called into question in the chapters on Said's critique of *Daniel Deronda*, and post-colonial critics' claims that both that novel and especially 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' support racism, where it is argued that such critiques do not take sufficient account of the literary sophistication of Eliot's discourse.

In Chapter 12, Eliot's relation to the political and ethical is further explored. Like Derrida she is distrustful of conceptual oppositions, and I discuss connections between their modes of thinking that enable her to be defended against accusations of contradiction, particularly on the part of political critics who align her with conservative thought. Chapter 13 brings together the various aspects of this study in a further analysis of her most ambitious novel, *Daniel Deronda*, through looking at the role of luck, which affects all elements of the novel, influencing its form and being central to its philosophical, political and ethical themes, Eliot's intellectual power being again confirmed by her anticipation of Bernard Williams's concept of moral luck. These interact with the narrative and psychological treatment of the characters at the level of realism, so that the force of the novel's human dimension is undiminished while at the same time its significance is enlarged.

I have not directly discussed Eliot as a woman writer or in relation to feminist issues, but there is a feminist undercurrent to my argument. Feminist critics have tended to be at best grudging in their admiration of Eliot. Her seeming reluctance to commit herself explicitly to feminist causes in her own time and what is seen as her failure in her writing to provide direct inspiration to modern feminists struggling to achieve equality have provoked much criticism. She has often been contrasted unfavourably with a writer like Charlotte Brontë, who creates characters with whom women readers can identify: 'heroines [who] are exemplars of female assertion'.<sup>13</sup> She can be defended against these attacks on the grounds that her realist aesthetic is not reconcilable with creating any kind of exemplar for non-literary reasons, and I shall argue that even those characters who are almost always seen as exemplars in her fiction, notably *Daniel Deronda*, are misinterpreted as such. Eliot's feminism lies deeper than creating female exemplars or bolstering the morale of feminist activists.<sup>14</sup> The term 'woman writer' would probably have been problematic for her. Her ambition was to be both a thinker and artist of the highest standard irrespective of gender, which involved taking the novel into new territory through literary innovation and experiment as well as intellectually confronting the major issues of her era like Darwinism or the ethical and political implications of materialist thinking, such as Bentham's form of utilitarianism. Yet she was, of course, a woman writer and she would have been well aware that no woman writer had been seen as comparable to figures such as Dante, Milton<sup>15</sup> or Goethe, writers she particularly admired and who combined art, intellectuality and engagement with their own times in such a way as to resonate also with future times. Eliot's main contribution to feminism was not only to aspire to that but also to achieve it, as this study will try to show, and thus prove that a woman writer can be equal at every level with even the greatest male writers.

# 1

## Eliot's Critique of Darwinism

### I

Darwin's theory of natural selection was the most explosive idea to emerge in the modern era. Not only did it undermine fundamentally such powerful justifications for religious belief as the argument from design, but secular or humanist alternatives to religion were equally threatened since the human species was no longer privileged and was the product of a struggle for existence that not only had no ethical dimension but also such a dimension would have been positively disadvantageous in that struggle. Also concepts of order that shape human thought and perception such as purpose or proportionality in the relation between cause and effect were called into question by Darwinian theory. Darwinism was of course roundly condemned from many different points of view and that continues, but most of the attacks on it have been along the lines that it could not be true because if it were life would be meaningless or there would be no justification for morality.<sup>1</sup> Even defenders of it, such as Social Darwinists, could do so only by projecting teleology onto the theory and rejecting the idea that chance played a significant role in which species survive, the 'fittest' being identified with the best and so deserving to thrive in the struggle for existence.

Although it is well known that George Eliot read Darwin's *Origin of Species* almost as soon as it was published, it has been claimed that Darwinism was not a major influence on her mind and work. Morse Peckham writes that 'there is no indication that the *Origin* disturbed Tennyson ... or Newman, or George Eliot'.<sup>2</sup> W. J. Harvey argues that Darwin had little effect on her: 'If *The Origin of Species* had by itself any effect on her creative imagination, it cannot have been much greater than that of the recapitulation theory – the effect of sharpening and pointing a few specific images.' He thinks Herbert Spencer a more important influence: 'All the external evidence, in fact, points to Spencer rather than Darwin as the prime intellectual influence concerning ideas on Evolution.'<sup>3</sup> In contrast I shall argue not only that Darwinism plays a significant role in her fiction but that she is possibly Darwinism's most cogent and intellectually sophisticated critic. Her critique is of especial interest because, while clearly aware that the theory could be interpreted in socially and ethically subversive ways, she had no serious doubt about its validity in scientific terms, so that unlike virtually all commentators on Darwinism in the Victorian period her critique of it does not attack or condemn Darwin's theory in itself.

Although Eliot's letter to Barbara Bodichon on Darwin has often been quoted, it is worth quoting again because it tells one so much about her attitude to natural selection:

We have been reading Darwin's book on the 'Origin of Species' just now: it makes an epoch, as the expression of his thorough adhesion, after long years of study, to the Doctrine of Development – and not the adhesion of an anonym like the author of the 'Vestiges', but of a long-celebrated naturalist. The book is ill-written and sadly wanting in illustrative facts – of which he has collected a vast number, but reserves them for a future book of which this smaller one is the avant-courier. This will prevent the work from becoming popular, as the 'Vestiges' did, but it will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough and open discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid. So the world gets on step by step towards brave clearness and honesty! But to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.<sup>4</sup>

The tone of this letter indicates neither surprise nor enthusiasm. Eliot was obviously familiar with Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* and would almost certainly have read Spencer's article of 1852, 'The Development Hypothesis', published in *The Leader*, which had suggested that species were not immutable. Though there is no indication that she had any doubts about Darwin's theory, her criticism of his style and arrangement of facts may suggest a lack of positive response, but it should be noted that T. H. Huxley, Darwin's main defender and supporter, also criticized its organization.<sup>5</sup> The reference to mystery need not be taken to mean that she did not really grasp the implications of the theory or preferred a metaphysical interpretation of evolution but rather as a sign that she believed that any human explanation of evolution cannot in itself explain the mystery of existence. But that this should be her immediate response again reinforces the impression that she was not an enthusiast or an advocate of the theory, like Huxley, but neither is there any indication that was she an opponent of it.

There are not a great many explicit references to Darwin and natural selection in her writings, but those there are all suggest acceptance but a distrust of the implications that could and were being drawn from it, especially as applied to the human realm. In a letter to publisher George Smith she remarks that 'natural selection is not always good, and depends (see Darwin) on many caprices of very foolish animals' (*Letters*, IV, 377). A passage in *Daniel Deronda* applies natural selection to the choice of marriage partner:

It was impossible to be jealous of Juliet Fenn, a girl as middling as mid-day market in everything but her archery and her plainness, in which last she was noticeably like her father: underhung and with receding brow resembling that of the more intelligent fishes. (Surely, considering the importance which is given to such an accident in female offspring, marriageable men, or what the new English calls 'intending bridegrooms,' should look at themselves dispassionately in the

glass, since their natural selection of a mate prettier than themselves is not certain to bar the effect of their own ugliness.)<sup>6</sup>

This passage suggests Eliot understood Darwin well enough but allows her narrator to view natural selection in an ironical spirit.

The clearest indication of a critical perspective on the implications of natural selection is to be found in a chapter of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* called 'Shadows of the Coming Race'. This chapter attacks the view of the narrator's friend Trost that machines will soon be able to do a great deal of the work of human beings. The narrator objects:

Am I already in the shadow of the Coming Race? and will the creatures who are to transcend and finally supersede us be steely organisms, giving out the effluvia of the laboratory, and performing with infallible exactness more than everything that we have performed with a slovenly approximateness and self-defeating inaccuracy?<sup>7</sup>

Looking forward to an era of automation, the narrator argues that if machines can take over some of humanity's functions, there is no reason why they should not take over all if they were designed to be without humanity's disadvantages. Machines might ultimately become self-reproductive and thus, by natural selection, supplant human beings:

This last stage having been reached, either by man's contrivance or as an unforeseen result, one sees that the process of natural selection must drive men altogether out of the field. (*ITS*, 141)

Human beings will have no call to use their energies since machines will do everything, and so

all but a few of the rare inventors, calculators, and speculators will have become pale, pulpy, and cretinous from fatty or other degeneration, and behold around them a scanty hydrocephalous offspring. (*ITS*, 141)

Thus by natural selection humanity will eventually disappear leaving only machines:

Thus the feebler race, whose corporeal adjustments happened to be accompanied by a maniacal consciousness which imagined itself moving its mover, will have vanished, as all less adapted existences do before the fittest – *i.e.*, the existence composed of the most persistent groups of movements and the most capable of incorporating new groups in harmonious relation. Who – if our consciousness is, as I have been given to understand, a mere stumbling of our organisms on their way to unconscious perfection – who shall say that those fittest existences will not be found along the track of what we call inorganic combinations ... Thus the planet may be filled with beings who will be blind and deaf as the inmost rock, yet will execute changes as delicate and complicated as those of human language and all the intricate web of what we call its effects, without sensitive impression, without sensitive impulse: there may be, let us say, mute orations, mute rhapsodies, mute discussions, and no consciousness there even to enjoy the silence. (*ITS*, 141–2)

The conception of evolution which underlies this vision, one perhaps more appreciated by a modern reader than by a Victorian, is Darwinian and not metaphysical. It shows how Eliot's mind transcends the limitations of her own era and conceptualizes scientific possibilities in the future that have been much discussed and debated in recent decades. Eliot accepts Darwin's view that there is no purpose or necessary progress in evolution: it is simply a matter of adapting best to the world in order to survive and reproduce. She also accepts that the process of natural selection could eliminate humanity as a species and human values from the world. The fittest are not the best, but only those best able to adapt. If natural selection could be applied by analogy to the social medium, and human beings began to think of society in such terms, might not the 'worst' prove more capable of adapting and surviving than the 'best'? This is, I think, a question posed when Darwinism is most obviously an implied presence in her fiction, and it is probably what most disquieted her about the possible consequences of Darwinism. Though the theory may be valid in scientific terms, it could have damaging social applications and effects, and this is apparent in the critique of characters in several of her novels who try to live their lives in implicitly Darwinian terms.

One can find further support for the view that Eliot understood and was affected by Darwin in examining the views of her partner G. H. Lewes on the subject. Evolution was a subject which interested him greatly and his views were respected by Darwin himself. It is extremely likely that Eliot would have agreed with Lewes on the scientific aspect of evolutionary theory and also with his views on its moral and social implications. Lewes wrote four articles in 1868 for the *Fortnightly Review* entitled 'Mr Darwin's Hypotheses' which show him to be a strong supporter of the scientific validity of natural selection.

The great value of Darwin's theory is, he says, that it more than anything else has established the monist world view of science. He begins his first article with the words "'The Origin of Species" made an epoch', echoing Eliot's view.<sup>8</sup> For him the theory of natural selection shattered all previous metaphysical formulations: it 'gave a sudden illumination to the old doctrine of Evolution, by substituting a precise and verifiable conception for the vague or metaphysical conceptions which were current'.<sup>9</sup> He warns, however, that it should be treated as a hypothesis, to be used provisionally as a means of grouping together previously unexplained facts, but should not be adopted as a final explanation. He attacks all metaphysical and vitalist interpretations of evolution and interestingly criticizes Spencer for his Lamarckian view that functions can originate structure. Lewes accepts the Darwinian view that the function of any organ is dependent on its structure.

From the point of view of anyone interested in Eliot's novels, his third essay on Darwin is most important because of its discussion of the relationship between organism and medium:

But we have only one half of the great problem of life, when we have the Organism; and it is to this half that the chief researches have been devoted, the other falling



into neglect. What is the other? The medium in which the Organism lives. Every individual object, organic and inorganic, is the sum of two factors: first, the relation of its constituent molecules to each other; secondly, the relation of its substance to all surrounding objects. Its properties, as an object or an organism, are the resultant of its constituent molecules, and of its adaptation to external conditions. Organisms are the resultants of a peculiar group of forces, exhibiting a peculiar group of phenomena. Viewing these in the abstract, we may say there are three regulative laws of life: (1) The *Lex Formationis* – the so-called *nisus formationis* or 'organising force'; (2) The *Lex Adaptionis*, or adaptive tendency; (3) The *Lex Hereditatis*, or tendency to reproduce both the original form and its acquired modifications. We have always to consider the organising force in relation to all surrounding forces – a relation succinctly expressed in the word Adaptation ... the Organism only preserves its individuality by synchronising its forces with the forces which environ it.<sup>10</sup>

Lewes remarks elsewhere, 'a Monad is an organism; a Cell is an organism; a Plant is an organism; a Man is an organism'.<sup>11</sup> Lewes's discussion of the relationship between organism and medium helps one understand why Eliot strives to recreate the medium of her characters in such detail: 'It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself' (*Letters*, IV, 97) and elucidates her comment in *Felix Holt* that 'there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life'.<sup>12</sup> Lewes defines the medium as 'the sum of the relations which the organism maintains with external agencies'.<sup>13</sup> He recognized, however, that there were essential differences between a man's relationship to his social medium and an animal's relationship to its natural medium despite the apparent similarities between the two, as I shall discuss later.

But it did seem on the surface that this evolutionary model could be used to describe the human individual's relationship to his or her social environment, and this disquieted many in the Victorian period and beyond. Darwin had after all formulated his theory from an analogy between Malthus's model of society and nature. Lewes says that '[u]nless the organism can adapt itself to the new External Medium by the readjustment of its Internal Medium, it perishes'.<sup>14</sup> Would it not be logical and justifiable for human individuals to see their relationship to society as one of struggle and adaptation in an effort to survive and thrive at any cost? Lewes's summary of Darwinism brings out the possible social dangers of seeing analogies between a non-human organism's relationship to nature and the individual's relationship to his or her social medium:

We have seen that Life, and all the forms of Life, result from the relation of the Organism and the Medium. Mr Darwin has shown how this relation can only be maintained through an incessant struggle. First, the Organism has to struggle against all those external forces which are unfavourable to its constitution, when their motions do not synchronise with its motions; in this struggle it succeeds by adapting itself to them, that is, by adjusting its motions to theirs. Next it has to struggle with other organisms, to eat or be eaten by them. Thirdly, it has to struggle

with rivals, and surpass them in securing the means for the preservation of its substance and the propagation of its kind. Contending against such manifold and ever-present forces of destruction, it is clear that every slight superiority which the Organism may develop will tend to bring it more and more into synchronism with external forces, cosmical and organic, and thus will be secured the 'survival of the fittest', as Mr Spencer happily phrases it.<sup>15</sup>

If it was believed that such an account also applied to human beings in society, then it is plain why Eliot would have explored in her fiction the implications that could be drawn from natural selection. Might it not lead many people to believe that those who devoted themselves entirely to self-interest would adapt better to changes in their environment than those who adhered to firm moral values? Would the latter not find it more difficult to adjust to social change and to compete in the struggle for existence? Also, if people came to believe that moral conduct had no transcendent basis and was a purely human code having no ultimate authority, another idea Darwinism could be used to support, why should they allow it to act as a restraint on their self-interest? If such ideas became a part of people's moral and social thinking, then society might become increasingly 'Darwinian': a place of struggle and competition among self-interested individuals who were prepared to adapt in any way necessary to ensure their own advantage and survival.

Darwin himself helped to promote such ideas by his view that humanity was not essentially different from the lower animals, which he did not develop until *The Descent of Man* in 1871 but which was a clear implication of the *Origin*,<sup>16</sup> and also by the blow he inflicted on traditional world views by his theory. Spencer similarly encouraged the notion that society could be thought of in evolutionary terms. In fact, any examination of the literature on Darwinism shows that many Victorians, both scientists and non-scientists, were ready to apply natural selection and the struggle for existence to human society. For example, Ernst Haeckel, one of the foremost defenders of Darwin, clearly applied the struggle for existence to human beings: 'This great competition for the necessities of life goes on everywhere and at all times, among human beings and animals as well as among plants ... You need only cast a glance at human society, where this competition exists everywhere, and in all the different branches of human activity.'<sup>17</sup> James Sully, a friend of Lewes and Eliot, expresses a similar view: 'It is, no doubt, true that even in the most advanced communities natural selection still plays a certain part. Thus all competition between individuals for wealth, public position, fame, &c., illustrates this principle.'<sup>18</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace, joint discoverer of the theory of natural selection, took a gloomy view of the social effect of natural selection: 'Among civilised nations at the present day it does not seem possible for natural selection to act in any way so as to secure the permanent advancement of morality and intelligence.'<sup>19</sup> Huxley in his Romanes lecture was also worried by the social implications of natural selection. Society could

only progress, he said, if 'ruthless self-assertion' were restrained and if 'the gladiatorial theory of existence' were repudiated. He relates 'the fanatical individualism of our time [to] attempts to apply the analogy of cosmic nature to society'.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most interesting books written on the consequences of Darwinism, a book read by Darwin himself and which he recommended to Wallace,<sup>21</sup> is *The Creed of Science* by William Graham, published in 1881. Graham's view that Darwinism could lead to the emergence of nihilistic self-seekers is close to Eliot's own view as reflected in her fiction, as I shall go on to discuss. He draws the following implications from the struggle for existence:

Why should we follow disinterested principles against our clear self-interest, the first of obligations, on the evolution theory of life as a ceaseless competitive fight? It is not open to the evolutionists, as it was to the benevolence moralists, to say we follow them because we derive greater pleasure and satisfaction from them. And when a collision arises, such as must constantly happen, between the self-asserting and the self-forgetting impulses, between our supposed interest and conscience, why may we not deny the authority of Conscience, that can only show such questionable credentials of her claims to rule as a mere inherited tendency amounts to? For this fact of inherited tendency is all that Darwin and Spencer give us on which to found the right of conscience to be ruler of our actions.<sup>22</sup>

He goes on to argue that if virtue is only the result of convention, the selfish man can easily rationalize it away when it conflicts with his self-interest. If evolutionary thinking becomes generally accepted the result will be '[a] deluge of immorality and moral materialism as bad as immorality' which will eventually destroy society.

These social and moral implications of Darwinism were the more disturbing to many Victorians since Darwinism also inflicted the greatest ever blow on the deep-seated anthropocentric idea that there was order and purpose in the universe. In contrast to all previous religious and moral systems, Darwin's world, it could be argued, seemed to consist only of blind chance, struggle and adaptation. Darwinism could then easily be used to support the view that there was no moral order in the world which urged human beings to accept a morality that transcended self-interest. Haeckel strongly proclaimed that Darwin's theory destroyed all basis for belief in a moral order: 'the "moral ordering of the world" is evidently a beautiful poem which is proved to be false by the actual facts ... It exists neither in nature nor in human life ... The terrible and ceaseless "Struggle for Existence" gives the real impulse to the blind course of the world.'<sup>23</sup> He dismisses notions of order and purpose and a creator as 'childish anthropomorphism'.<sup>24</sup> Some Victorians found the emphasis on chance in Darwin intolerable: 'That this ordered Cosmos is not from necessity or chance, is almost a self-evident fact ... Is it by chance that light and heat cause plants to carry on their wonderful operations?'<sup>25</sup> Even Wallace was unable to accept the lack of purpose. The world and the universe, he wrote, 'are as they

are, firstly, for the development of life culminating in man; secondly, as a vast school-house for the higher education of the human race in preparation for the enduring spiritual life to which it is destined'.<sup>26</sup> He hoped that this doctrine would appeal 'to all who accept the view that the universe is not a chance product'. William Graham in *The Creed of Science* thought that the substitution of chance for purpose and design would have disastrous effects. If Darwin is right, all theism is worthless, and even worse, 'it was chance that stumbled upon every living thing, as well as that unique thing, the human consciousness, with all its wonderful content – Art, Science, Morality'.<sup>27</sup> But he goes on to say that this cannot be accepted, as the belief in order and purpose is a need of the mind.

The application of natural selection and the struggle for existence by analogy to society and to the social and moral life of humanity, and the blow the theory inflicted on the notion of design and purpose in the universe, were probably the two most serious implications of Darwinism for many Victorians, though one should point out perhaps that most people were able to reconcile evolution with concepts of order that were consoling, such as Spencer's translation of natural selection into the concept of 'survival of the fittest', and identifying the 'fittest' with the best. It is very probable that Eliot accepted some of Darwin's conclusions before the *Origin* appeared, such as the transmutation of species and that humanity was the product of an evolutionary process, and Feuerbach had already shattered for her anthropocentric world views. But Darwin made the dangerous implications of such ideas much clearer, not just to a few intellectuals but to anyone who cared to read his book and draw a few simple conclusions, the kind of conclusions drawn by Graham, for example:

[T]hese facts of competition and chance ... bring home to the individual in the thick of the competitive and pitiless struggle, the fact and the reminder that life is still, in spite of our moral progress, in a real and most serious sense, a struggle of each for himself, and a struggle not merely against his competing fellows, but also against the threatening chapter of contingencies from within and without.<sup>28</sup>

Eliot's fiction anticipates such conclusions being drawn from Darwinism, and I shall try to show that it was an important concern of her novels to explore and offer a critique of the kind of calculating and amoral individualism to which such thinking could lead. But before focusing on Darwinism in her fiction one needs to consider further the basic grounds of her critique: though there may be some analogies between human beings' relationship to their social environment and non-human organisms' relationship to their natural environment, it was invalid to see the relationship between the human individual and society in terms of struggle and adaptation, principally because there were crucial differences between a social and a natural environment which created a fundamental dissociation between human consciousness and animal consciousness, transforming totally the nature of the human individual's relationship to society and other human beings.

## II

That this was the attitude to Darwinism that emerges in Eliot's fiction is supported by considering Lewes's detailed critique of social applications of Darwinism in his book, *The Study of Psychology*, the fourth volume of his *Problems of Life and Mind*. Eliot was integrally involved with its production, assembling it from Lewes's notes after his death. Not only is it almost certain she agreed generally with his views on the subject but also revised his text in the light of her own thinking.

Lewes criticizes how Darwin applies the theory of evolution to humanity. He emphasizes that human beings are social animals, and this fact makes humanity utterly different from the natural animals, so that any comparison between humans and animals cannot leave this out of account:

Biology furnishes both method and data in the elucidation of the relations of the organism and the external medium; and so far as Animal Psychology is concerned this is enough. But Human Psychology has a wider reach, includes another important factor, the influence of the social medium. This is not simply an addition, like that of a new sense which is the source of new modes of Feeling; it is a factor which permeates the whole composition of the mind. All the problems become complicated by it. In relation to Nature, man is animal; in relation to Culture, he is social ... Culture transforms Nature physically and morally ... The organism adjusts itself to the external medium; it creates, and is in turn modified by, the social medium, for Society is the product of human feelings, and its existence is *pari passu* developed with the feelings which in turn it modifies and enlarges at each stage.<sup>29</sup>

Thus biology can never be used on its own to understand humanity; sociology must be taken into account. In Lewes's view Darwin is not sufficiently aware of this.

In a section entitled 'Differences of Animal and Human' Lewes takes issue with Darwin. In *The Descent of Man* Darwin had said that there was no fundamental difference between humanity and the higher animals in mental faculties, but Lewes thinks Darwin fails to distinguish between 'functions' and 'evolved faculties'. By function he means the native endowment of an organ; by faculty he means 'its acquired variation of activity'.<sup>30</sup> Though humans may be similar to the higher animals in terms of organic functions, in faculties there is scarcely any comparison. The acquirement of the faculty of language by human beings has totally transformed their animal functions. Both an ape and a man have hands, 'but the ape's faculties are not a fiftieth part of those performed by the hand of man'.<sup>31</sup> In the same section Lewes goes on to make the following important distinction between human beings and animals:

Animals have egoistic impulses; they have scarcely any sympathetic altruistic impulses beyond the sexual and the parental. They manifest a certain tenderness towards young and small animals (probably a derivation of the parental instinct), but this tenderness vanishes in the presence of any egoistic impulse.<sup>32</sup>

He contrasts the behaviour of a baboon and a human mother. In the case of human responses, language allows the human mother to transform a maternal instinct into a maternal sentiment because it can communicate the results of the experience of others to those who have not personally experienced them, whereas the baboon or any animal only has its personal experience. Thus a human mother can appreciate the claims of offspring in general, not just her own. She can have an 'intellectual appreciation of the claims of the helpless' which is denied to a baboon. Lewes goes on to say that

[t]he law of animal action is Individualism; its motto is 'Each for himself against all'. The ideal of human action is Altruism; its motto is 'Each *with* others, all for each'.<sup>33</sup>

Though animals may be incapable of humanity's most degraded acts, they can have no virtues:

It is true that animals have no virtues; for Virtue is the suppression of our egoistic impulses to promote the welfare of others; and animals are incapable of this conception. Their instincts lead directly to actions, never to ideas. Hence, while they share with man the sexual instinct they know nothing of Love.<sup>34</sup>

It is the influence of the social medium which is responsible for the basic difference between the psychology of human beings and that of animals, though Lewes admits that in all other respects humanity is similar: 'to the three great factors Organism, External Medium, and Heredity, which it has in common with Animal Psychology, it adds a fourth, namely, relation to a Social Medium.'<sup>35</sup> He goes on to state more fully his disagreement with Darwin's view that there is no essential difference between human beings and animals in their mental faculties, stressing the crucial role played by language:

I hold, indeed, that the mental *faculties* of man are developed out of mental *functions* which animals share with man; but these faculties, when developed, constitute as broad a line of demarcation, a barrier as impassable, as that between the vertebrate and invertebrate structure. The moral and higher intellectual functions of man can no more be explained by reference to the animal functions alone than the flight of birds can be explained by the creeping of reptiles, though both are reducible to mechanical and physiological principles. Just as birds have wings, man has Language ... Language enables man's intelligence and passions to acquire their peculiar characters of Intellect and Sentiment. And Language is a social product of a quite peculiar kind. (Emphasis in original)

He emphasizes the difference between human and animal society:

In the so-called animal societies, there is apparently nothing beyond an aggregation of individuals, with some division of employments; there is no subordination or co-ordination – only co-operation; no power invested in individuals and classes; no command and obedience; no relinquishment of personal claims; above all, they have developed nothing like the Family as the social unit, and Tradition as the social experience.<sup>36</sup>

Lewes then discusses the differences between humans and animals with regard to morality. He accepts that animal emotions may constitute 'a rudimentary moral sense', but they must be socially developed before they can become ideas of what is right and wrong. Though he admits that some people are only barely susceptible to the social transformation of this animal moral sense, the development of human society based on language has nevertheless created a moral consciousness in human beings which makes humans utterly different from the animals. He goes on to account for the basic moral differences between humanity and animals:

Thus while man, in his moral beginnings, has a marked kinship with the animals, whose life, like his own, is regulated by desires and intelligence, he stands apart in the attainment of moral conceptions and of organised ethical tendencies, which are correctly called moral intuitions. These latter form a justification for the *a priori* intuitional doctrine; but its explanation lies in the principles of experience. We have intuitions of Right and Wrong in so far as we have intuitions of certain consequences; but these must have been learned in our own experience or transmitted from the experience of others. Some writers who are disposed to exaggerate the action of Heredity believe that certain specific experiences of social utility in the race become organised in descendants, and are thus transmitted as instincts. With the demonstrated wonders of heredity before us, it is rash to fix limits to the specific determinations it may include; but the evidence in this direction is obscured by the indubitable transmission through language and other social institutions.<sup>37</sup>

Lewes is, then, very reluctant to go beyond empiricism to any doctrine of innate moral ideas to account for humanity's moral differences from the animals. The fact that human beings live in human society and possess language adequately explains these differences.

Lewes's discussion is particularly interesting since he is a strong supporter of Darwin's theory and accepts almost all of his basic ideas. The only fundamental disagreement is Lewes's emphasis on the importance of the social medium and language on humanity's development. But this gave him the basis for rejecting completely the applications of Darwinism to society that I have already discussed, such as those by William Graham. Human beings as social and language animals could not think of themselves in isolation from others and devote himself utterly to individual self-interest. It may be natural for animals to lead lives of complete individualism and to find nature a struggle for existence, but this had very little application to human beings and their relationship to society. It was thus invalid to use Darwinism to support the view that society was a struggle among individuals with the fittest surviving and as a justification for leading a life of amoral self-interest. Nor was it valid to argue that by undermining metaphysical or religious beliefs Darwinism had destroyed the basis of moral values, since morality was a natural social product which could be justified in purely human terms.<sup>38</sup>

It seems almost certain that Eliot would have been in agreement with Lewes in his criticism of Darwin. For her, as for him, the importance of the social medium was fundamental, and any attempt to compare human beings and animals which failed to take adequate account of this must have seemed simplistic. In a review of Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind in Mind* in 1881, the reviewer remarked, 'On the whole it will perhaps be just to credit Lewes with the doctrine of the dependence of the Human Mind upon the Social Medium as his signal and crowning discovery.'<sup>39</sup> It is very probable that Eliot influenced this aspect of Lewes's thought, but in any case she would almost certainly have agreed with him on the importance of social influences in shaping the human mind, and it was this which enabled both of them to accept Darwin's theory but to oppose and reject the implications many other Victorians drew from it.

### III

Is Eliot's position on Darwinism a significant part of her fiction? I shall argue that it is. In particular, the figure of the amoral individualist who recurs to a greater or lesser extent from *Silas Marner* onwards has strong Darwinian connotations. This figure can be seen clearly in *Felix Holt*, a novel in which the Darwinian resonances are especially strong, the most clearly Darwinian character being the somewhat ironically named Christian.

Christian is a cold, calculating, isolated individual who is determined to serve his own interests at all times. The Darwinian aspect of his character is exemplified in his willingness to adapt himself to any set of circumstances so that he can exploit each situation that arises for his own advantage. But the novel shows that despite all his calculation and his willingness to make any adjustment to safeguard himself, he cannot always be master of events:

The fact was that Mr Christian, who had been remarkable through life for that power of adapting himself to circumstances which enables a man to fall safely on all-fours in the most hurried expulsions and escapes, was not exempt from bodily suffering – a circumstance to which there is no known way of adapting one's self so as to be perfectly comfortable under it, or to push it off on to other people's shoulders. (*FH*, 120)

The language of this passage alludes to Darwinian thinking in its emphasis on 'adapting to circumstances' which causes Christian to fall on all fours like an animal. The somewhat cumbersome plot development by which Christian must take opium for a bodily ailment, falls asleep and then has his pocket cut off by Scales while carrying an important letter does have a thematic significance. Christian thinks he can exploit chance and circumstance for his own purposes, and he is successful in doing this most of the time, but he cannot adapt himself to



every situation and the sheer unpredictability of events cannot be calculated on. Even in its own terms a life devoted to complete self-interest is not always successful. When events go against men like Christian who gamble on being master of every situation and who rely on deception to give them an advantage over others, they are extremely vulnerable.

Christian is the exemplification of Darwinian man as described in Graham's *The Creed of Science*, one who implicitly poses the question, 'Why should we follow disinterested principles against our clear self-interest ... on the evolution theory of life as a ceaseless competitive fight?':

Christian, having early exhausted the more impulsive delights of life, had become a sober calculator; and he had made up his mind that, for a man who had long ago run through his own money, servitude in a great family was the best kind of retirement after that of a pensioner; but if a better chance offered, a person of talent must not let it slip through his fingers. He held various ends of threads, but there was danger in pulling at them too impatiently. (*FH*, 208)

He is prepared to adapt himself to any set of circumstances for his own advantage, being eager to exploit chance in his own interest and living a life of calculation which takes no account of moral conduct. He can be masterful or servile depending on which seems necessary in the circumstances. To his employer he is servile, but to Mr Lyon he behaves masterfully. He believes he can live without ties, without acknowledging his past or the consequences of his actions. He has even adopted another man's identity for his own advantage.

But *Felix Holt* shows that this 'Darwinian' form of life is humanly quite untenable. The attempt to live it requires that he keep his motives and feelings hidden from everyone, for to reveal himself to anyone would leave him vulnerable. He must therefore choose isolation and alienation. A life devoted to total individualistic self-seeking cannot be lived openly in human society, for he cannot help being conscious of how others will judge his motives and actions. It must be secret and hidden. It is an 'unnatural' human life. Though devotion to individual self-interest at all times may be 'natural' for an animal, it is unnatural in human society where people cannot think of themselves in isolation from others since language and thought are necessarily shared and create an intrinsic connection between self and other. Although Christian also believes the past has no connection with his present self, the novel suggests that 'a man can never separate himself from his past history', as the epigraph to Chapter 21 puts it. This is true in two senses: when others find out about Christian's past this leads them to judge him in a certain way, and he is affected by this; it is also impossible for him to stop thinking of his life as a continuity.

Christian's individualism also involves a struggle with other individualists, and this has particular Darwinian implications. Jermyn and Johnson are as devoted to self-interest as he is, and this leads to a struggle taking place between

them. Jermyn is confident that he can get the better of his adversaries, but the following analogy with chess is used to describe the nature of his position:

Fancy what a game at chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects, more or less small and cunning: if you were not only uncertain about your adversary's men, but a little uncertain also about your own; if your knight could shuffle himself on to a new square by the sly; if your bishop, in disgust at your castling, could wheedle your pawns out of their places; and if your pawns, hating you because they are pawns, could make away from their appointed posts that you might get checkmate on a sudden. You might be the longest-headed of deductive reasoners, and yet you might be beaten by your own pawns. You would be especially likely to be beaten, if you depended arrogantly on your mathematical imagination, and regarded your passionate pieces with contempt.

Yet this imaginary chess is easy compared with the game a man has to play against his fellow-men with other fellow-men as his instruments. He thinks himself sagacious, perhaps, because he trusts no bond except that of self-interest; but the only self-interest he can safely rely on is what seems to be such to the mind he would use or govern. Can he ever be sure of knowing this? (*FH*, 236)

The self-interested individualism of men like Jermyn, Christian and Johnson makes the social medium resemble a Darwinian world of competition and struggle, but there is no security for the human individual who leads this form of life, as the above passage shows. It can function successfully only if other people lead ordered, moral lives while the individualist is prepared to deceive and exploit them for his own advantage. But when others are as self-interested as he himself and he must struggle against them, he can never be secure or free from fear. Eliot is suggesting that it is humanly intolerable to have to sustain such a mental state at all times.

Jermyn, like Christian, is a character with Darwinian associations. His animalistic qualities, the 'savage side' (*FH*, 98) of his nature is much emphasized. The imagery used to describe him has evolutionary implications. Christian says of him, 'He's as sleek as a rat, and has as vicious a tooth. I know the sort of vermin well enough. I've helped to fatten one or two' (*FH*, 182). This image is continued in a later passage concerning him: 'But though a man may be willing to escape through a sewer, a sewer with an outlet into the dry air is not always at hand' (*FH*, 331). As Harold Transome puts pressure on him and he is close to ruin, he is prepared to resort to any means or any adaptation in order to survive. A passage used to describe him when he has no longer any room to manoeuvre is particularly Darwinian:

A doomed animal, with every issue earthed up except that where its enemy stands, must, if it has teeth and fierceness, try its one chance without delay. And a man may reach a point in his life in which his impulses are not to be distinguished from those of a hunted brute by any capability of scruples. Our selfishness is so robust and many-clutching, that, well encouraged, it easily devours all sustenance away from our poor little scruples. (*FH*, 380)

Eliot is not denying or rejecting the idea that human beings have anything in common with the lower animals, quite the contrary. The main difference,

however, between humans and animals is, as Lewes argued, that human consciousness has been transformed by socialization and the acquisition of language. But in a pre-social condition a human being is little different from an animal. This is most clearly seen by considering the most single-minded egotist in the novel, Harold Transome's young son, Harry. He has been brought up virtually deprived of social influences, with the result that his animal qualities are almost untransformed. How close he is to being an animal is shown in the following passage, describing his meeting with Esther:

This creature, with the soft broad brown cheeks, low forehead, great black eyes, tiny well-defined nose, fierce biting tricks towards every person and thing he disliked, and insistence on entirely occupying those he liked, was a human specimen such as Esther had never seen before, and she seemed to be equally original in Harry's experience. At first sight her light complexion and her blue gown, probably also her sunny smile and her hands stretched out towards him, seemed to make a show for him as of a new sort of bird: he threw himself backward against his 'Gappa', as he called old Mr Transome, and stared at this new-corner with all the gravity of a wild animal ... Seeing that Esther bore having her hair pulled down quite merrily, and that she was willing to be harnessed and beaten, the old man began to confide in her, in his feeble, smiling, and rather jerking fashion, Harry's remarkable feats: how he had one day, when Gappa was asleep, unpinned a whole drawerful of beetles, to see if they would fly away; then, disgusted with their stupidity, was about to throw them all on the ground and stamp on them, when Dominic came in and rescued these valuable specimens; also, how he had subtly watched Mrs Transome at the cabinet where she kept her medicines, and, when she had left it for a little while without locking it, had gone to the drawers and scattered half the contents on the floor. But what old Mr Transome thought the most wonderful proof of an almost preternatural cleverness was, that Harry would hardly ever talk, but preferred making inarticulate noises, or combining syllables after a method of his own. (*FH*, 316–17)

Harry's rejection of the defining human attribute of language makes his animality apparent. Extreme individualists like Jermyn or Christian are tending towards this pre-social condition of animal egoism. Their behaviour implies a repudiation of the social aspect of human life and a wish to return to a purely animal form of life.

Jermyn and Christian are not the only characters in Eliot's fiction in whom one can see the influence of Darwinism shaping her conception. Her most detailed and psychologically subtle characterization of an individualist of the Christian type is Tito in *Romola*, and Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* is perhaps the most degraded example of the same type of character. The major critique of all of these characters is that in attempting to lead lives of almost animal-like egoism, in being prepared to employ any means to exploit circumstances and to make any adaptation to their environment which suits their own purposes, they ignore the fact that such a form of life is unnatural for human beings as social animals. Human consciousness has been transformed by social influences so that a human being cannot think of himself or herself in isolation from others or from society. A totally individualistic life can only be lived by the rejection

of a human identity. Eliot's critique may have drawn on Aristotle's *Politics*, which argues that since all people are born into the 'polis' or a community and since the 'polis' ultimately exists for the sake of the 'good life', the ethical is a necessary part of what it means to be human.

One significant effect of Darwinism on Eliot's novels is thus to develop her preoccupation with human egotism and to place it within a cultural context. The very fact that egotism is a significant theme in her fiction before the publication of the *Origin* would have made her even more aware than her contemporaries of the social and moral dangers of Darwinism's potential use as a justification for naked egotism and the pursuit of self-interest. Although she did not need Darwin to affirm humanity's animal origins or to conclude that people were inherently egotistic, a theory with a scientific basis that could be seen as justifying and validating egotism and selfish behaviour could clearly be socially dangerous. However, unlike commentators such as Graham, Eliot does not draw totally negative and pessimistic conclusions from Darwinian ideas. Her fiction suggests that, since human beings are social animals whose consciousness has been transformed by language and social influences, they are capable not merely of transcending this animal egotism but of sublimating it. Characters such as Felix Holt or Mr Lyon are not less basically egotistic than the likes of Christian, Jermyn or Tito, but because of their ethical sense they are able, most of the time at least, to sublimate their egotistic drives or exercise renunciation. For Eliot the danger of applying Darwinism simplistically to human beings and society is that it could provide philosophic support for an ideology that had no place for sublimation or renunciation. A comment by Lewes shows that he (and Eliot) found Darwinism in itself no threat to ethical values: 'All the animal Impulses become blended with human Emotions. In the process of evolution, starting from the merely animal appetite of sexuality, we arrive at the purest and most far-reaching tenderness.'<sup>40</sup> Even if human beings are innately egotistic and subject to animal impulses, the animalistic side of human's nature can be transformed or overcome through the influence of a purely human consciousness.

Darwinian issues are evident also in *Middlemarch*. One recalls Henry James's comment: '*Middlemarch* is too often an echo of Messrs Darwin and Huxley.'<sup>41</sup> The influence of Darwinism is probably most clearly present in the imagery of the novel, particularly in relation to Lydgate: 'Lydgate was much worried, and conscious of new elements in his life as noxious to him as an inlet of mud to a creature that has been used to breathe and bathe and dart after its illuminated prey in the clearest of waters.'<sup>42</sup> A comparison between Dorothea and Lydgate in terms of egotism raises questions similar to those discussed above in relation to *Felix Holt*. The difference between them is not that she possesses less basic egoism but that she is much more capable than he is of sublimation and renunciation. When her ego is put under the greatest stress as a result of being snubbed by Casaubon after he has consulted Lydgate about his health, she is able to overcome the egotistic desire to hurt him because she realizes this would

be an action false to her whole self which is both social and natural; the desire to hurt him is an animal impulse which belongs to the moment and can be consciously resisted. But Lydgate tends to succumb to such egotistic impulses. His passion for Laure is the obvious example: 'He knew that this was like the sudden impulse of a madman – incongruous even with his habitual foibles. No matter! It was the one thing which he was resolved to do' (*M*, 150). He is also inclined to adapt himself to circumstances when this favours his narrow self-interest in a way which would be impossible for Dorothea. He votes for Tyke along with Bulstrode when all his better feelings urge him to support Farebrother. When his money troubles increase and Rosamond's stronger will is gradually dominating him, the pressure on him to adapt in any way necessary to survive becomes great. His former idealism crumbles and he takes the view that 'chance has an empire which reduces choice to a fool's illusion' (*M*, 651). He had earlier been determined not to accept money from Bulstrode, but as his difficulties increase this determination collapses and he adapts to circumstances, gratefully accepting without adequately taking into account Bulstrode's motives. The contrast with Ladislaw who rejects Bulstrode's money is clear.

Characters like Dorothea and Ladislaw have an idea of themselves present to their consciousness which enables them to resist animal impulses or the pressure to adapt easily to any situation for the sake of self-interest. Though Lydgate is not as 'Darwinian' as characters like Jermyn or Christian and possesses some idealistic qualities, he has insufficient control over his egotism. It is even suggested that his scientific work is basically motivated by a desire for power. Animal egotism, then, tends to predominate in Lydgate and makes him subject to impulses of the moment and influences him to compromise for self-interest when circumstances go against him.

It is in *Daniel Deronda* that we find possibly Eliot's most Darwinian character. Lapidoth is a man utterly dominated by his own interests and prepared to adapt himself to any set of circumstances if it would prove profitable. This quality is linked with gambling in the novel, and of course the emphasis on chance in the survival of species in Darwin implied that the whole evolutionary process could be compared to gambling. Lapidoth is an actor and a compulsive gambler who continually thinks in terms of chance: 'I came to England with no prospect, but the chance of finding you' (*DD*, 632), and in Mordecai's home 'He began with the intention of awaiting some really good chance, such as an opening for getting a considerable sum from Deronda' (*DD*, 675). In him gambling is taken to the ultimate extreme:

The gambling appetite is more absolutely dominant than bodily hunger, which can be neutralized by an emotional or intellectual excitation; but the passion for watching chances – the habitual suspensive poise of the mind in actual or imaginary play – nullifies the susceptibility to other excitation. In its final, imperious stage, it seems the unjoyous dissipation of demons, seeking diversion on the burning marl of perdition. (*DD*, 662)

Lapidoth is prepared to adapt himself to any situation without being restricted by any moral scruples whatsoever. Even the thought of confronting Mordecai and knowing that his past acts towards his family will be condemned does not disturb him: 'Lapidoth had some sense of what was being prepared for him in his son's mind, but he was beginning to adjust himself to the situation and find a point of view that would give him a cool superiority to any attempt at humiliating him' (*DD*, 664), for 'his imagination [was] more wrought on by the chances of his getting something into his pocket with safety and without exertion, than by the threat of a private humiliation' (*DD*, 663). The intensity of Mordecai's condemnation does, however, take him by surprise, but even his apparent emotional breakdown is partly the assumption of another role to adjust to a difficult situation: 'and yet, strangely, while this hysterical crying was an inevitable reaction in him under the stress of his son's words, it was also a conscious resource in a difficulty' (*DD*, 665). Lapidoth does not seem to possess a human identity at all. Only self-interest and the need to survive at all costs motivate his actions. All else is secondary. He has virtually ceased to be human and lives only at an animal level of consciousness.

Darwinian associations are also a factor in Gwendolen Harleth's characterization. She too loves to gamble and to play roles, but unlike Lapidoth she retains a human identity even though this is sustained by guilt and neurosis. At first she is quite confident she can exploit chance for her own advantage: 'for being satisfied with her own chances, she felt kindly towards everybody and was satisfied with the universe' (*DD*, 85). She had been 'conscious that she held in her hands a life full of favourable chances which her cleverness and spirit would enable her to make the best of' (*DD*, 378). But when her family loses its capital she finds, like Lydgate, that the world is less malleable than she thought. She finds herself being forced to adapt to her environment to survive. She thought marriage to Grandcourt would have been a way out, but the truth about his past is a blow: 'A splendid marriage which presented itself within reach had shown a hideous flaw. The chances of roulette had not adjusted themselves to her claims' (*DD*, 201). Klesmer then destroys her hope that she could be a success as a singer. The pressures being exerted on her seem akin to those exerted on an organism placed in an alien environment and struggling to adapt. Mr Gascoigne thinks that she will adjust to the situation by marrying: 'Gwendolen was going to adapt herself to circumstances like a girl of good sense' (*DD*, 229).

As she finds less and less room to manoeuvre, pressures on her to marry Grandcourt increase. It is interesting that her eventual acceptance of him is not an act of will at all. Having been used always to act on impulse or from self-interest, she cannot exert her will to make the moral choice of refusing him: 'She could not let him go: that negative was a clutch' (*DD*, 257). Instead of being capable of a human decision to resist egotistic desires and external forces, she succumbs like an animal to pressure of circumstances. Although Eliot believes that human beings can be true to some idea or belief that can

be the focus for desire and impulse and so triumph over animal egotism, Gwendolen does not possess self-transcending ideals and her acceptance of Grandcourt after her promise to Mrs Glasher alienates her from her deepest feelings. But the psychological consequences of this that are so mentally and emotionally shattering for her indicate that unlike Lapidoth animal egotism does not virtually eradicate the human side of the self.

Gwendolen's relationship to Grandcourt also possesses an evolutionary aspect. He is compared to a 'sleepy-eyed animal on the watch for prey' (*DD*, 353). His 'delight in dominating' (*DD*, 289), derived from animal egotism, is much emphasized in the novel. A comment by Lewes on animal behaviour seems relevant to him:

The animal must destroy or else it could not feed. A rival threatening to take some of this food rouses Anger, the emotion of a thwarted impulse. The thwarted sexual impulse calls out the same feeling. Derived from this will be in the higher imaginative animals the love of Domination: the desire to make others afraid of, or subservient to us.<sup>43</sup>

This passage from Lewes helps to define the sexual sadism underlying Grandcourt's relationship with Gwendolen. He is also an aristocrat, but one who no longer has a social function. In the past his dominating qualities might have found a viable social expression – it is said that he might have won a reputation 'if he had been sent to govern a difficult colony' (*DD*, 507) – but deprived of that they have degenerated into sadism.

This allusion to the Governor Eyre scandal perhaps denotes an awareness that sublimations of animal egotism and the desire to dominate can become perverted or distorted so that they can lead to and provide justifications for tyranny or oppression and thus have far worse consequences than succumbing to a purely animal impulse. The novels suggest that sublimations are not without risk and need to be open to critique; for example, Savonarola's idealism in *Romola* is seriously flawed, as *Romola* eventually recognizes, as is to a much greater degree that of the prior in *The Spanish Gypsy*, a committed inquisitor who feels justified in committing mass murder. Even the apparently positively presented idealism of Felix Holt and Mordecai is viewed with some ambiguity. Felix in trying to direct a drunken crowd out of harm's way is indirectly responsible for the death of a policeman and also for creating a worse situation than existed originally since he provides an opportunity for 'the multitudinous small wickednesses of small selfish ends' to issue 'in widely-shared mischief that might yet be hideous' (*FH*, 269). Conventional readings of Mordecai tend to see him and his optimistic proto-Zionist idealism as being presented in an unambiguously positive light. But, as I shall discuss later, the novel suggests that Mordecai as idealist is naïve about the dark side of human nature and that prophets and visionaries are 'in dangerous company' (*DD*, 436) with fanatics and mad people as well as with the likes of Copernicus and

Galileo. It may be fortunate that Mordecai's idealism is going to be carried forward by the more knowing Deronda. Darwinism, by apparently proving that the human species was descended from lower animals, also gave great impetus to pessimistic interpretations of human nature as one can see from its influence on neo-Gothic texts such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula*. The epigraph to *Daniel Deronda* with its portentous first line, 'Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul', suggests there are links between *Daniel Deronda* and such texts. Though, as I have argued, Eliot subjects Darwinism as applied to the human situation to serious critique, she does not deny that the darker messages that can be drawn from it have credibility or that higher ideals that refuse to acknowledge and thus fail to confront those darker messages may be more dangerous than giving way to animal impulse.



## 2

# Eliot and the Byronic

## I

Although almost all critics of George Eliot have recognized her concern with egotism, she is not generally considered among those nineteenth-century writers who had a serious interest in the Byronic egotist, the character who had emerged from Gothic literature and the *Sturm und Drang* and who came to the greatest prominence in the works of Byron. This figure played an important part in nineteenth-century literature and was used by numerous writers to signify revolt or egotistic aspiration. Perhaps the fundamental attribute of the Byronic egotist is that he refuses to accept any external source of authority which can define him. He either defies all sources of authority which try to assert their superiority over the self, like Byron's Manfred, or else he thinks he can create his own values by an act of will quite independently of all generally accepted moral sanctions.<sup>1</sup> However, characters with Byronic aspects or associations who are devoted to ego or will or to their own self-chosen values appear in most of her novels, such as Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss* to a minor degree; Mrs Transome and Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt*; Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*, called a 'sort of Byronic hero' (*M*, 375) by Mrs Cadwallader though more of a Romantic aesthete, and Lydgate in whom there are traces of the Byronic; and in *Daniel Deronda*, where the Byronic is more prominent than in her other fiction, there is Gwendolen Harleth, inspired by Byron's grand-niece whom Eliot saw gambling in Bad Homburg, Deronda's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, committed to her own set of individualistic values, and Grandcourt, in whom the passion of youth has degenerated into sadism in middle age and who may represent for Eliot Byronism in decay. Critics do not generally discuss these characters in Byronic terms, understandably since realist fiction is not well adapted to representing the Byronic in its most extreme form. Eliot's most obviously Byronic figures are to be found in her poetry, particularly Armgart in the poem of the same name and Don Silva in her tragic drama in verse, *The Spanish Gypsy*.

Eliot's recurrent interest in the Byronic, taking her work as a whole, deserves the attention of critics. Although she grew to dislike Byron both as a man and as a poet – 'Byron and his poetry have become more and more repugnant to me of late years' (*Letters*, V, 54) – her knowledge of his work is apparent throughout her writing. Exploring why her work focuses on the Byronic as late as the 1860s and 1870s and why she took the trouble to subject it to critique, most powerfully in

*The Spanish Gypsy*, will again reveal her concern with the major intellectual and philosophical issues of her time. Like Darwinism, the Byronic can be seen as a significant threat which, again like Darwinism, has not gone away and raises issues which remain pertinent even in the twenty-first century.

It is in *The Spanish Gypsy* that Eliot most seriously engages with the Byronic. It is certainly one of her most ambitious works in its conception – she worked on it for four years until its publication in 1868 – even if the critical consensus is that it is a failure in artistic terms. Byron was the most subversive of the Romantics and created a tradition of transgression that continued through the nineteenth century and beyond. In the Romantic period, the Byronic egotist can be seen as symbolizing a negative rebellion against a universe which was, as Carlyle put it in his semi-autobiographical *Sartor Resartus*, ‘all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb’.<sup>2</sup> Responding in Byronic fashion, Carlyle’s persona Teufelsdröckh, had asserted the ‘Everlasting No’, a negativity that at least enabled resistance even if it had no positive solution. He was subsequently able to transcend such egotistic defiance primarily, like both Wordsworth and Goethe, by discovering the presence of God in an organic universe and proclaimed famously, ‘Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe’. But in the later nineteenth century, with developments in philosophy and science, culminating in Darwin, the concept of a mechanical, amoral, godless universe was more powerfully present than it had ever been. Was the Byronic egotist’s pessimism about the universe and stance of defiance and revolt not still a valid one? Also, in the course of the nineteenth century, there were expressions of egotism and pessimism – the latter notably by Schopenhauer, an admirer of Byron’s poetry – which went much further than Byron. Eliot’s concern with this was perhaps heightened by the fact that the work of Feuerbach, whose major work, *The Essence of Christianity*, she had translated – ‘With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree, but of course I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably’ (*Letters*, II, 153) – had been used to justify the most extreme egotistic views: ‘intelligent opponents have often urged it against Feuerbach that his system must morally lead to pure Egoism.’<sup>3</sup> The most uncompromising expression of egotism in the nineteenth century, Max Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (The Ego and His Own) first published in 1844, was strongly influenced by Feuerbach’s philosophy, both Feuerbach and Stirner being associated with the ‘Young Hegelians’. Eliot would surely have been worried at such a development of ideas she accepted and which led Stirner to assert that all values stemmed from the self: ‘I decide whether it is the *right thing* in me; there is no right *outside* me. If it is right for *me*, it is right.’<sup>4</sup> Similar views can be found in Nietzsche, an admirer of Byron’s *Manfred*: ‘The distinguished type of human being feels *himself* as value-determining; ... he knows that *he* is the something which gives honor to objects; he *creates values*.’<sup>5</sup> Byron can therefore be seen as perhaps the most

significant source of a sceptical, nihilistic, ego-centred tradition of thought that developed through the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century and beyond.

Eliot, who had rejected belief in a transcendent reality, cannot refute the Byronic egotist's claim that in an amoral universe the individual is free to rebel or assert his own chosen values by proclaiming like Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* that nature is the 'Living Garment of God'. Although she recognized the value of religion when she praised church assemblies because their very nature expressed 'the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law which is to lift us into willing obedience and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse' (*Letters*, V, 448), she herself could not argue that the truth of religion supported Christian morality and refuted the egotist's claim that there is no moral order which can define the self. Her writing suggests – to represent her position in the most basic terms – that the self has an existential need for a sense of moral order, but it must first of all be discovered within the self as feeling. This could then lead to a larger social and moral vision. Even if the universe was amoral and godless, it was simplistic to believe that the egotist could simply dismiss all moral and religious sanctions and adhere to his or her own chosen value. If Byron's writing is understood in the intellectual and cultural context I have sketched above, then Eliot's interest in Byronic egotism is easily comprehended. But as with Darwinism Eliot cannot merely reject the Byronic by denying its validity. Her aim therefore is not merely to attack or condemn the Byronic Don Silva but to explore the roots of his elevation of the ego and suggest that almost inevitably it will have a tragic outcome. In the notes on tragedy she left regarding the poem she wrote,

A tragedy has not to expound why the individual must give way to the general: it has to show that it is compelled to give way, the tragedy consisting in the struggle involved, and often in the entirely calamitous issue in spite of a grand submission. Silva represents the tragedy of entire rebellion: Fedalma of a grand submission, which is rendered vain by the effects of Silva's rebellion: Zarca, the struggle for a great end, rendered vain by the surrounding conditions of life.<sup>6</sup>

*The Spanish Gypsy* may have aroused the interest of few Eliot commentators, but if treated as a poem of ideas it has considerable force and illuminates both Eliot's thinking and why the Byronic plays a significant role in her fiction. It shows that her interests extended to areas not commonly associated with her, interests which connect her with a European literary and intellectual context since the Byronic is much more significant in German, French and Russian literature than in English literature after Byron. It is clear that *The Spanish Gypsy* falls into the trap that Eliot herself recognized, that of 'laps[ing] from the picture to the diagram' (*Letters*, IV, 300), an artistic weakness she endeavoured to overcome in her novels, as I shall discuss in later chapters, but the fact that she devoted so much time to its composition shows how important it was to her to try

to counter the subversive power that the Byronic continued to exert within European culture.

## II

Don Silva is a Spanish knight who is disillusioned with his Spanish heritage, primarily because of the nature of the war against the Moors and the activities of the Inquisition. Being contemptuous of Spanish policies, he feels that his heritage has no claim on his respect and that he is justified in rebelling against it. Yet he has no alternative plan of action in mind. He still serves the Spanish cause, though he regards himself as being free to do as he likes. His rebellion only manifests itself as negative defiance. He is opposed and reproached by his uncle, the prior, the personification of the Spanish imperialist and an eager inquisitor. Silva's resolve to marry the non-Spanish Fedalma, who has Gypsy origins, is seen by the prior as an implicit rejection of his duty to Spain. Silva replies with Byronic defiance:

'Tis you, not I, will gibbet our great name  
To rot in infamy. If I am strong  
In patience now, trust me, I can be strong  
Then in defiance.<sup>7</sup>

But the prior makes the prophetic statement that if he utterly rejects the claims of the past for his own self-chosen value he will never find a stable identity:

you will walk  
For ever with a tortured double self,  
A self that will be hungry while you feast,  
Will blush with shame while you are glorified,  
Will feel the ache and chill of desolation,  
Even in the very bosom of your love. (SG, 84)

Brought up in a tradition he can no longer accept, unable to feel any allegiance to a Christianity perverted into persecution, Silva has created his own personal value out of love. Fedalma is his substitute for the values he has lost: in her 'Silva found a heaven / Where faith and hope were drowned as stars in day' (SG, 178). Even if this blasphemy will damn him, he will choose her and reject his former God:

Is there no God for me  
Save him whose cross I have forsaken? – Well,  
I am for ever exiled – but with her! (SG, 315)

In the extremes to which Silva takes it, love is an attempt at a purely subjective creation of value to overcome his despair, having come to believe that the world is meaningless and valueless. The following speech anticipates Schopenhauer at his most extreme:

Death is the king of this world; 'tis his park  
 Where he breeds life to feed him. Cries of pain  
 Are music for his banquet; and the masque –  
 The last grand masque for his diversion, is  
 The Holy Inquisition. (*SG*, 193)

Love is a desperate effort to choose consciously his own value in order that the self can transcend the amorality of life and protect himself against despair. He cannot therefore give up Fedalma when she decides to honour her Gypsy heritage at the behest of her father. Silva thinks that his chosen value of love is superior to the claims of his past and all his former allegiances. It justifies the breaking of all bonds or duties, and he is prepared to commit any action, no matter how immoral in traditional terms, to retain it: 'I will sin, / If sin I must, to win my life again' (*SG*, 197). To lose her is to lose his own self: 'that lost self my life is aching with' (*SG*, 198) and declares that his love for her, 'Makes highest law, must be the voice of God' (*SG*, 212).

He dismisses any authority superior to the self in Stirner-like or proto-Nietzschean fashion:

I will elect my deeds, and be the liege  
 Not of my birth, but of that good alone  
 I have discerned and chosen. (*SG*, 391)

This extreme expression of Byronic egotism claims that there is nothing external to the self that can define it, and all past claims or present obstacles must be crushed by the will. Since the mind can recognize no values beyond the self as valid, it must create its own value. Eliot tests this philosophy against experience in the poem.

But though Silva has rebelled against his Spanish past, he has not liberated himself from it. His identity is still basically defined by the fact that he is a Spanish knight. The way of life and the attitudes of the latter are an inherent part of him, which he does not even think of rejecting. It is an important part of Eliot's treatment of the Byronic elevation of the ego to show that social factors are among its most important determinants. Eliot, with her knowledge of sociology and psychology, places the egotist in a social situation. His attitudes and behaviour cannot be considered in isolation, for they are the product of a particular society and culture that has shaped him. He unquestioningly identifies with the assumptions of one who has been brought up as a Spanish

aristocrat. When he learns of Fedalma's flight and Gypsy birth, he regards these as 'momentary crosses, hindrances / A Spanish noble might despise' (SG, 175). He is quite confident he can regain her:

What could a Spanish noble not command?  
He only helped the Queen, because he chose;  
Could war on Spaniards, and could spare the Moor;  
Buy justice, or defeat it – if he would:  
Was loyal, not from weakness but from strength  
Of high resolve to use his birthright well. (SG, 175)

The will which he celebrates is thus the product of the aristocratic background he professes to despise. His assertion of personal will to defy the demands of the tradition in which he has been brought up is only a negative expression of the social domination inherent in that tradition:

Don Silva had been suckled in that creed  
(A high-taught speculative noble else),  
Held it absurd as foolish argument  
If any failed in deference, was too proud  
Not to be courteous to so poor a knave  
As one who knew not necessary truths  
Of birth and dues of rank; but cross his will,  
The miracle-working will, his rage leapt out  
As by a right divine to rage more fatal  
Than a mere mortal man's. (SG, 176)

His claim, then, that one can create one's own value by the power of the will is inherently flawed. Instead of discovering a new basis for his identity, he is merely exploiting Spanish aristocratic values in his personal interests. The following assertion of his will philosophy and of Byronic egotism is thus undermined by its implicit assumptions:

I have no help  
Save reptile secrecy, and no revenge  
Save that I *will* do what he [the prior] schemes to hinder.  
Ay, secrecy, and disobedience – these  
No tyranny can master. Disobey!  
You may divide the universe with God,  
Keeping your will unbent, and hold a world  
Where He is not supreme. (SG, 177)

The poem calls into question this philosophy by showing that it is not a freely chosen position, the only possible response to a world without acceptable

values. In Silva's case, it is rather the product of his alienation from his social background and the negative assertion of the social attitudes in which he has been brought up. He is another variation on the comment in *Felix Holt* that 'there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life'. The narrator also acknowledges that underlying his outward will assertion and defiance, he felt 'Murmurs of doubt, the weakness of a self / That is not one' (SG, 178), though this insecurity only makes him rebel the more against the prior, whose identity is totally defined by his Catholic faith:

With all his outflung rage  
Silva half shrank before the steadfast man  
Whose life was one compacted whole, a realm  
Where the rule changed not, and the law was strong.  
Then that reluctant homage stirred new hate,  
And gave rebellion an intenser will. (SG, 178)

Even his rebellion, then, is not freely chosen but is the outcome of the psychological strain which results from his social alienation.

One of the most important debates in the poem, in which Silva's Byronic egotism is challenged, is that between Silva and his Jewish servant Sephardo. To Silva's assertion that 'Death is the king of this world', Sephardo replies that even if this were so, human morality would still remain. A physician would know that mercy existed within himself even if all the angels in heaven denied it. If God does not exist and the world is as Silva describes it, which Sephardo makes no attempt to deny, the good would still exist as a purely human construct based on human feeling. The individual is inextricably a part of humanity and can never achieve complete cultural transcendence. The ego itself is in a large degree a cultural product. It was an illusion, then, to believe that the egotist could completely separate himself from his fellow human beings and be totally self-sufficient.

Silva goes on to proclaim the need for 'naked manhood' (SG, 195), for men who are unattached to any beliefs or systems and can stand alone. Sephardo replies that there is no such thing. We all owe allegiance to something larger than ourselves, in his case to his Jewish heritage. It is monstrous to consider all things without preferences; we are compelled to have certain priorities and partialities: 'My father is first father and then man.' But Silva is prepared to cast aside all claims in choosing to marry Fedalma:

That I'm a Christian knight and Spanish duke!  
The consequence? Why, that I know. It lies  
In my own hands and not on raven tongues. (SG, 201)

But the fragility of his view that these characteristics are mere accidental features has already been made apparent. Sephardo, in contrast, refers 'to the

brand / Of brotherhood that limits every pledge' (SG, 202). We need some law that is superior to the will in order to define the self:

Our law must be without us or within.  
The Highest speaks through all our people's voice,  
Custom, tradition, and old sanctities;  
Or he reveals himself by new decrees  
Of inward certitude. (SG, 211)

The implication of Sephardo's argument – one which draws on both Feuerbachian and Carlylean thinking – is that the self's inner need for a sense of meaning and value is projected outwardly in customs and traditions, but if these become outdated and moribund, their essential content, which corresponds to this need within the self, must be reformulated. Silva makes no attempt to do this. The Spanish society he is a part of has become decadent since it strives to maintain itself through domination and persecution of other races and religious groups. Instead of trying to find a new form for the valuable content of his heritage or acting against corrupt forces within it, he constructs a self-created philosophy of the will. Eliot tests this philosophy against experience and shows that it offers no possibility of a stable identity. One cannot choose to reject the past completely without fragmenting the self.

Silva soon discovers this. The town of Bedmár is taken by the Gypsies, and many of his former friends are killed and the prior is executed. This crushingly brings home to him how deep-rooted is his connection with the heritage he thinks he can reject: his own acts against his former stronghold are felt as self-inflicted wounds. In this crisis, he realizes that his Spanish past is a fundamental part of his being, and his inner life becomes 'cancerous':

Silva had but rebelled – he was not free;  
And all the subtle cords that bound his soul  
Were tightened by the strain of one rash leap  
Made in defiance. (SG, 340)

He is unable to escape from 'his past-created, unchanged self'. The self cannot remain authentically human if it denies continuity of being, and any rejection of the defining elements in his past by an act of will must inflict terrible psychological wounds. He even acknowledges that the prior embodies certain values which are an integral part of his selfhood. He repudiates the role he has chosen: 'I am a Catholic knight, / A Spaniard who will die a Spaniard's death!' (SG, 345) and kills Zarca, the Gypsy leader and Fedalma's father.

The consequence of rejecting his past is an intolerable sense of self-division. This leads to a severe identity crisis which makes him commit murder. The valuable content of his past life must be the basis for any secure sense of



selfhood. Even in a Spain ruled by the Inquisition this is so; he cannot simply reject Christianity and the Spanish tradition and worship a self-created God of his own. At the end of the poem he commits himself to serving

that Spain  
 Who nourished me on her expectant breast,  
 The heir of highest gifts. (*SG*, 371)

### III

Neither Silva nor Fedalma can wholeheartedly accept the tradition they belong to. Fedalma, though she adopts the opposite position to Silva, and chooses to obey her father and accept her Gypsy origin, derives no happiness from this choice. The poem suggests that their dissociation from their respective traditions represents the alienated response of the modern consciousness to the claims of the past. In contrast, both the prior and Zarca, in different ways, possess utterly stable identities. The prior believes totally in the objective truth and superiority of his religion, and Zarca has identified himself with the ideal of Gypsy nationhood. Silva is naturally alienated from a Spain dominated by the Inquisition, and Fedalma has been brought up outside the Gypsy tradition and can thus only make a willed decision to accept it. She cannot respond to it with an undivided consciousness. The prior and Zarca, being certain of their commitments, are free from the sense of self-division created by excess of self-consciousness. Even the prospect of death cannot undermine the prior's cast-iron sense of his identity. He possessed 'The strength of resolute undivided souls / Who, owning law, obey it' (*SG*, 340). For Fedalma and Silva, such certainty is impossible: their situations have necessarily made them self-conscious and self-divided. Silva is 'Doom-gifted with long resonant consciousness / And perilous heightening of the sentient soul' (*SG*, 74), and after his desertion suffers from the 'tortured double self' the prior had prophesied.

Fedalma's self-division is also evident, though she does not suffer the same identity crisis as Silva. Her acceptance of her Gypsy role which entails rejection of passionate love means she must choose sorrow, the 'sublimar pain', for her choice, 'cut her heart with smiles beneath the knife, / Like a sweet babe foredoomed by prophecy' (*SG*, 292). Though she makes a conscious decision to adopt the Gypsy way of life, she feels emotionally detached from it. She contrasts her own condition with that of her Gypsy servant, Hinda:

She knows no struggles, sees no double path:  
 Here fate is freedom, for her will is one  
 With her own people's law, the only law

She ever knew. For me – I have fire within,  
But on my will there falls the chilling snow  
Of thoughts that come as subtly as soft flakes,  
Yet press at last with hard and icy weight. (SG, 278)

Fedalma's situation, and the poem suggests it is symbolic of the modern or post-Romantic situation, has deprived her of the stability and certainty of her servant. She is cut off from such a sense of tribal consciousness. She is an example of the isolated, self-conscious ego, detached from those traditional beliefs, those 'cosmic syntaxes',<sup>8</sup> which could integrate the self within a single world view that was accepted as true.

Fedalma's adoption of Gypsy life only makes her more aware of her divided consciousness. When she feels the power of Zarca's vision, she thinks she can 'walk erect, hiding my life-long wound'. At such times she feels strong in her resolve. But this feeling is only temporary: self-consciousness returns and the sense that 'There's nought but chill grey silence, or the hum / And fitful discord of a vulgar world' (SG, 279). Love for both Silva and Fedalma had been an attempt to heal the division they felt in themselves. It was a form of compensation for the lack of a heritage or a belief with which they could identify completely.

Silva's position is the more difficult since the tradition he is a part of has clearly become corrupt and decadent. Fedalma can at least assent intellectually and with part of her feelings to the Gypsy purpose. Silva's Byronic rebellion is an intellectual response to his situation:

Thus he called on Thought.  
On dexterous Thought, with its swift alchemy  
To change all forms, dissolve all prejudice  
Of man's long heritage, and yield him up  
A crude fused world to fashion as he would. (SG, 311–12)

But he discovers that there are deeper forces in the self that cannot be rejected by the will. After joining the Gypsies, he yearns for the memories and associations of the past, for human contact. The alienation and isolation involved in rejecting his roots and confronting the indifferent universe alone proves too much:

He could not grasp Night's black blank mystery  
And wear it for a spiritual garb  
Creed-proof: he shuddered at its passionless touch. (SG, 312)

The strain his rebellion places on his inner self is intolerable. Although among his people 'he had played / In sceptic ease with saints and litanies', he now comes to realize their symbolic value. The religious and ancestral symbols connected

with Spanish life are forms which express a meaning which is inextricably a part of himself, even supporting him while he scorned them:

Sustaining him even when he idly played  
 With rules, beliefs, charges, and ceremonies  
 As arbitrary fooling. (*SG*, 314)

The religious and social forms he has tried to reject are not mere outward symbols of an evil system: they express the fundamental human values of the way of life in which he has been brought up, and more than that, they symbolize the human truths created by feeling in its encounter with external reality. The essential identity of Spain still exists even if it has been corrupted by the Inquisition. He discovers by experience that the philosophy of the ego and the will is an intolerable violation of his inner self which cannot be borne. Any identity that denies that it needs to connect with past experience is at risk of succumbing to alienation or even worse to a psychological crisis in which the self seems to become infected by disease:

Forcing each pulse to feed its anguish, turning  
 All sweetest residues of healthy life  
 To fibrous clutches of slow misery. (*SG*, 340)

#### IV

*The Spanish Gypsy* does not simply attack Silva's egotism and devotion to the will, however, but the energies they generate need to be properly directed. This is apparent in the contrast between Silva and Zarca, in many ways as supreme an egotist as Silva. But Zarca commits all his egotistic energies to furthering what he believes are the best interests of his people through creating for them by power of will a sense of nationhood. His vision resembles that of a religious prophet. Fedalma implicitly compares him to Moses, Christ and Mahomet. He is treated in the poem like a Carlylean hero who creates history by the force of his vision. For him it is a value-creating act. He knows that there is nothing beyond it, no providence, that guarantees its success:

No good is certain, but the steadfast mind,  
 The undivided will to seek the good:  
 'Tis that compels the elements, and wrings  
 A human music from the indifferent air.  
 The greatest gift the hero leaves his race  
 Is to have been a hero. (*SG*, 162)

The good does not exist external to Man; it must be created by him as heroic visionary. In contrast to Silva, Zarca does not regard the lack of immanent

meaning and value in the world as a justification for Byronic egotism but rather as urging the creation of value through a social and moral vision that brings the good into being.

However, the poem does not cover up moral complexities and ambiguities. Zarca's vision may appear questionable because it seems to be characterized by the same dangerous idealism that underlies the prior's beliefs. Both men are prepared to go beyond recognized moral boundaries in order to achieve what they regard as the good. This is a recurrent theme in Eliot's works, most obviously in *Romola*, written before *The Spanish Gypsy*, and *Daniel Deronda* written after. The prior's belief in the absolute truth of his religion convinces him that acts of evil cease to be evil if they favour what he regards as God's purpose: 'Tis so God governs, using wicked men – / Nay, scheming fiends, to work his purposes' (*SG*, 131). In this way he can justify the Inquisition.

This kind of reasoning is the consequence of identifying his beliefs with an objective truth beyond the human realm. If the good is seen as something external to the human, whatever helps to achieve it is regarded as right. Good and evil are not defined in relation to humanity but in terms of a rigid doctrine which is more important than the human and has become separated from it. But Zarca differs from the prior in an important respect, since for him evil is always evil. It cannot be redeemed even if it furthers his concept of the good. No good that will be achieved will ever lift the burden of evil. It may serve as grounds to defend an act of evil, but it can never, as the prior believes, change its nature.

Since the Zíncali have no philosophy or religion which will allow them to come to terms with problems of this kind, Zarca must heroically elect to bear this burden for them. In this he again greatly resembles the Carlylean hero who identifies his deepest insight with the divine and uses his possession of it to justify his authority over his people. Cruel acts may be necessary if the Gypsies are to survive:

they shall be justified  
By my high purpose, by the clear-seen good  
That grew into my vision as I grew,  
And makes my nature's function, the full pulse  
Of inbred kingship ...

The Zíncali have no god  
Who speaks to them and calls them his, unless  
I, Zarca, carry living in my frame  
The power divine that chooses them and saves. (*SG*, 324–5)

He knows that killing the Spaniards is evil, but he believes there is no alternative. Yet his essential humanity is shown in his sympathy with the dead of Bedmár. This act was initiated before Silva joined the Gypsies. Even the execution of the

prior shows humanity in that it transcends mere revenge. He decrees that he should not be burned as an act of vengeance, though the prior is one of those 'human fiends / Who carry hell for pattern in their souls' (*SG*, 332). Instead he is executed with due ceremony. But the poem recognizes, as perhaps Carlyle did not sufficiently, that there is always a risk that the visionary idealism of a Zarca can degenerate into, and become barely distinguishable from, the idealism of someone like the prior.

Although the poem may be sympathetic to Zarca's aim, it also shows external reality as being indifferent to human aspirations. Moral good must be projected onto a world in which value is not intrinsic, but the morally indifferent development of events can frustrate this. With Zarca's death, the only force that could hold the Gypsies together disintegrates and results in a kind of Gypsy diaspora. Zarca is the exemplification of Carlyle's view that the Byronic egotist must convert his rebellion and will assertion into devotion to the best interests of his society. This was one means of socially transforming Romantic egotism. But the poem suggests that the transcendentalism underlying Zarca's certainty in his vision is a less modern position than the state of alienated self-consciousness that afflicts both Silva and Fedalma. Although both Silva and Fedalma finally commit themselves to their respective cultural traditions, this does not heal their self-division, and it also deprives them of love. Their situation is doubly tragic, for another aspect of it is that though the negativity of alienated self-division is clear, any recovery of the sense of identity associated with a tribal consciousness is for them not only virtually impossible but also a state of consciousness that they can no longer feel as desirable.

This pessimistic conclusion is subject to revision when Eliot returns to some of the central issues of *The Spanish Gypsy* in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. There are obvious similarities between Zarca and the Gypsies and Mordecai and the Jews; Deronda's situation has similarities to Fedalma's, and the problem of Byronic egotism re-emerges in the characterization of Gwendolen and the princess. Eliot revises the tragic structure of the poem, for though Mordecai, like Zarca, dies he passes the torch on to Deronda who, though sceptical about prophecy and transcendentalist certainties, is happy to commit himself to the attempt to bring into being Mordecai's ideal. Deronda is able to do this not by overcoming alienation but by finding a way of positively transforming it so that it can give him sufficient mental space to make informed choices that he believes can further the progress of the world, though this is not without its problems as I shall discuss later. There is thus hope for the future even if it cannot be guaranteed – as Deronda is well aware – but in being able, self-consciously, to identify himself joyfully with Mordecai's vision he achieves mastery over the negative alienation to which he had previously been vulnerable, and that threatens the modern consciousness with self-division.

*The Spanish Gypsy* certainly deserves more attention than Eliot critics have given it. It makes explicit ideas and concerns that are also part of the novels but

which are less obvious because they are absorbed into their realist fabric. It also reveals Eliot as intellectually engaged with the preoccupations and concerns of European writers associated with post-Romanticism, an aspect of her which has been neglected by most commentators on her work who have tended to confine her within the tradition of the English social novel.

## Eliot and Moral Philosophy: Kant and *The Mill on the Floss*

Although George Eliot is widely regarded as a moralist, few critics have claimed that she should be viewed as a moral philosopher. It may even be doubtful whether many critics have considered her to have a moral philosophy in any serious sense. She has often been accused of didacticism, with the implication that her moral philosophy consists merely of a set of moral principles derived from Victorian assumptions as to what is right and what is wrong. F. W. H. Myers's often-quoted account of a conversation with Eliot in Cambridge has done much to establish Eliot's image as one of the heaviest of Victorian moralists: 'taking as her text ... the words, *God, Immortality, Duty*, – pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory the *third*. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrequiting law.'<sup>1</sup> This image has been reinforced by the claim that it was contradictory to believe in Christian morality even though she was no longer a believer. This provoked the mockery of Nietzsche, though he apparently had no direct acquaintance with her writing: 'In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic.'<sup>2</sup> Even when Eliot is treated seriously in relation to moral philosophy, she is accused of lack of originality: 'She draws from various traditions, and comes up with a position that is neither systematic nor particularly consistent' – and of intellectual confusion – 'she seems philosophically confused here ... [she] vacillates in her presentation of selfishness.'<sup>3</sup> There is thus a lack of intellectual respect for Eliot as a moral philosopher and one can see this reflected in the way critics have responded to her depiction of moral dilemmas in her fiction.

Probably the most discussed of these dilemmas is Maggie Tulliver's moral crisis in *The Mill on the Floss* when, after her inadvertent elopement, she is faced with the decision whether to marry Stephen Guest or return to St Ogg's. Critics discuss this without feeling the need to allude to moral philosophy since they tend to assume that Eliot is merely applying a particular set of moral principles that are typically Victorian. This is exemplified in the following comments: 'She has placed Maggie in a dilemma in which no preconceived principle could direct her choice;'<sup>4</sup> 'What positive is there to set against the sour taste of renunciation;'<sup>5</sup> 'The difficulties experienced by readers are caused by a didacticism which falsifies the drama and makes genuine moral choice

impossible;<sup>6</sup> '[Maggie] remains a figure of pathos, the prey of circumstances that are capricious and accidental.'<sup>7</sup> Feminists critics have particularly objected to what they see as Maggie's perverse choice of renunciation. Kathleen Blake has remarked, '*The Mill on the Floss* is a text of scandal and fascination to feminists',<sup>8</sup> as can be seen in Elaine Showalter's claim that 'Maggie is the progenitor of a heroine who identifies passivity and renunciation with womanhood'.<sup>9</sup> Since Eliot's critics feel justified in disagreeing with what they regard as a set of views or beliefs that she adheres to passively and didactically imposes on the text, they assume there is no need therefore to bring moral philosophy into the discussion.

The kind of criticism the moral dilemma presented in the novel has generated implicitly disregards the fact that Eliot is both artist and intellectual. I will argue that to leave out of account the role of moral philosophy in her fiction is to ignore a dimension that has a crucial bearing on interpretation. It is striking that any mention of Immanuel Kant is virtually absent from critics' discussion of the 'Great Temptation' section of the novel, a significant omission since Kant is not only one of the most important of moral philosophers but his philosophy is directly concerned with the moral dilemma that is at the centre of Eliot's novel. It is clear in Eliot's essays that she had read Kant; she refers specifically and knowledgeably to his *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>10</sup> and it can be safely assumed that someone as interested in moral questions as Eliot would have been familiar with his ethical writings.

That Kant was very much in Eliot's mind in the writing of the Maggie-Stephen Guest scenes is evident, I would suggest, in the language each of the characters uses. In order to demonstrate this I shall quote from Kant's two most important texts that have a bearing on the question of moral choice. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* he writes,

Will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational. *Freedom* would then be the property this causality has of being able to work independently of *determination* by alien causes ... We have at least traced the determinate concept of morality back to the Idea of freedom, but we have been quite unable to demonstrate freedom as something actual in ourselves and in human nature: we saw merely that we must presuppose it if we wish to conceive a being as rational and endowed with consciousness of his causality in regard to actions – that is, as endowed with a will. Thus we find that on precisely the same ground we must attribute to every being endowed with reason and a will this property of determining himself to action under the Idea of his own freedom.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that though associated with determinism Eliot believed that in practice a belief in free will was existentially necessary, as she makes clear in a short essay, 'Moral Freedom':

Life & action are prior to theorizing, & have a prior logic in the conditions necessary to maintain them. To regard any theory which supplants that logic as having supreme intellectual authority is a contradiction ... When once we have



satisfied ourselves that any point of view is hostile to practice, which means life, it is not the dominance of the intellect, but poverty of judgment, that determines us to allow its interference in guiding our conduct ... It is rational to accept two irreconcilables, rather than to reject tested processes in favour of reasoning which tends to nullify all processes.<sup>12</sup>

A true moral act or decision for Kant is one which is rationally chosen by the will and which may involve acting contrary to one's strongest feelings and inclinations. He writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,

The essential point in every determination of the will by the moral law, is that being a free will it is determined simply by the moral law, not only without the co-operation of sensible impulses, but even to the rejection of all such, and to the checking of all inclinations so far as they might be opposed to that law ... consequently we can see *a priori* that the moral law, as a determining principle of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling which may be called pain.<sup>13</sup>

Kant takes a very critical view of nature. In his view morality has little to do with nature; indeed nature must be strongly resisted. He is associated, of course, with the 'categorical imperative', which contends that all moral action must be governed by universal principles and so be unconditioned. Discussing duty in the *Groundwork*, he writes,

For the purpose of achieving this proof it is of the utmost importance to take warning that we should not dream for a moment of trying to derive the reality of this principle from *the special characteristics of human nature*. For duty has to be a practical, unconditioned necessity of action; it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to whom alone an imperative can apply at all), and *only because of this* can it also be a law for all human wills. Whatever, on the other hand, is derived from the special predisposition of humanity, from certain feelings and propensities, and even, if this were possible, from some special bent peculiar to human reason and not holding necessarily for the will of every rational being – all this can indeed supply a personal maxim, but it is not a law: it can give us a subjective principle – one which we have a propensity and inclination to act – but not an objective one on which we should be *directed* to act although our every propensity, inclination, and natural bent were opposed to it.<sup>14</sup>

*The Mill on the Floss* can, I believe, be illuminated if these moral principles of Kant are taken into account. In this novel Maggie Tulliver takes a moral decision – founded on her sense of duty towards others which for her has the status of moral law – to reject the love of Stephen Guest because each of them has other ties. It is clear that if these ties did not exist Stephen Guest is the man she would choose to marry. But it is her conscious and rational moral decision to reject him even though this is in conflict with her strongest feelings:

O it is difficult – life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; – but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us – the ties that have made

others dependent on us – and would cut them in two ... Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly – that I must not, cannot, seek my own happiness by sacrificing others.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Stephen Guest believes they should be true to their strongest feelings: ‘Maggie, if you loved me as I love you, we should throw everything else to the winds for the sake of belonging to each other’ (*MF*, 448). Though she rejects this argument, circumstances later bring them together and she lacks resistance when Stephen allows their boat to be carried along by the tide, a natural force. She has, however, not made a conscious decision to go back on her previous resolution; her moral will has temporarily lost control, and she surrenders to ‘this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will ... and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded’ (*MF*, 464). The next day, however, when this dream-like state dissipates, conscience and the will reassert themselves, and she decides to leave Stephen and return to St Ogg’s.

The debate which takes place between them, both before she goes off with him in the boat and afterwards, strongly suggests the influence of Kantian moral thought. Stephen adopts the view that powerful feeling and nature should have priority in determining actions and decisions, clearly an anti-Kantian position. Maggie believes choice is only valid if it is the outcome of both the will and a principle that she believes has objective force – though, as the novel shows, that objective force may not be easy to establish. This leads to her refusing to give way to her strongest feeling. To be sure, feeling is involved in her decision, but without her moral will the feelings that motivate her to give up Stephen would be overcome by the stronger feelings – sexual and therefore ‘natural’ – which attract her towards him. We can see how anti-Kantian Stephen’s views are in the continual emphasis he places on nature; he tells her repeatedly that her resistance to their love is ‘unnatural’: ‘It is unnatural – it is horrible’ (*MF*, 448); ‘It is come upon us without our seeking: it is natural – it has taken hold of me in spite of every effort I have made to resist it’ (*MF*, 448); ‘See how the tide is carrying us out – away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster round us – and trying in vain’ (*MF*, 465); ‘We have proved that the feeling which draws us towards each other is too strong to be overcome: that natural law surmounts every other; we can’t help what it clashes with’ (*MF*, 475). Philip Wakem had argued similarly in resisting Maggie’s attempt to end their meetings in the Red Deeps: ‘no one has strength given to do what is unnatural. It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negotiations’ (*MF*, 329).

But Maggie in her debates with Stephen Guest takes the Kantian view that will and rational choice are more important than nature or inclination, though Maggie departs from Kant in seeing moral duties as also natural: ‘Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too’ (*MF*, 450). But significantly ‘inclination’, a key Kantian term, should be resisted. Stephen had ‘fought fiercely with over-mastering inclination’ (*MF*, 469) and lost but

Maggie continues to struggle against it: 'Remember what you felt weeks ago ... that we owed ourselves to others, and must conquer every inclination which could make us false to that debt ... If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment' (*MF*, 475). Stephen argues that '[w]e must accept our own actions and start afresh from them' (*MF*, 477), but Maggie does not feel she has performed an action. Her will did not choose to go off with him; on the contrary 'Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence' (*MF*, 467). When she recovers from the passiveness of the drift down river with the tide her will is again primary: 'Maggie's will was fixed unswervingly on the coming wrench. She had made up her mind to suffer' (*MF*, 474). Eliot's critics may be tempted to equate this choice of suffering with masochism, but it can be seen as reflecting Kant's view that 'the thwarting of all our inclinations' must produce 'pain'. She repeatedly accuses Stephen of denying her choice: 'You have wanted to deprive me of my choice' (*MF*, 466); 'I couldn't choose yesterday' (*MF*, 474); 'I will not begin any future, even for you ... with a deliberate consent to what ought not to have been' (*MF*, 474); 'I have caused sorrow already – I know – I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it ... It has never been my will to marry you: if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul' (*MF*, 476). Stephen himself 'had the uneasy consciousness that he had robbed her of perfect freedom yesterday' (*MF*, 472).

In several of Eliot's other novels one can also detect the influence of Kant's moral philosophy. In *Middlemarch*, for example, Lydgate is anti-Kantian in the choices and decisions he makes to disastrous effect. Impulses of the moment and pressure of circumstances motivate his actions to the disregard of rationality and the will. Lydgate, however, believes himself to have a strong will. He looks down on Farebrother because he believes Farebrother's will is weak: 'Lydgate thought that there was a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr Farebrother' (*M*, 185). But Lydgate's concept of the will is a non-Kantian one. It does not signify a strong commitment to reason or conscience or anything that aspires to the status of moral law. For him will is rather the expression of his strongest feelings, and he is proud and arrogant: 'Lydgate's conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous' (*M*, 148). This makes him vulnerable to impulses of the moment, as in his feelings for the French actress Laure: 'He knew that this was like the sudden impulse of a madman – incongruous even with his habitual foibles. No matter! It was the one thing which he was resolved to do' (*M*, 150). Similarly in his relationship with Rosamond it is impulsive feeling and desire that lead him to propose to her, even though he has earlier made a rational decision not to marry: 'Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy ... poured out words of gratitude and tenderness with impulsive lavishment' (*M*, 298).

We also see Lydgate failing to make a choice based on any sense of objective moral principle when he casts his vote for Tyke as chaplain to the infirmary, even though he believed Farebrother was the more deserving candidate. He had hoped that the vote would be decided without his participation being necessary, but when he is forced to give a casting vote he votes for Tyke partly through a combination of narrow self-interest, as not doing so would be likely to have a negative effect on his relationship with Bulstrode, and partly to show his contempt for those who see him as under the control of Bulstrode. Lydgate lacks the sense of moral principle reinforced by will and rationality that would make him capable of making a choice that resisted his dominant impulse or pressure of circumstances, and in this respect he stands in contrast to other characters in the novel, Dorothea, Mary Garth and Ladislav, who all possess both moral principles and wills strong enough to adhere to them.

Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* believes, like Lydgate, that she has a strong will and she likes nothing better than to exercise it. We are told that 'her will was peremptory' (*DD*, 12). But for her also 'will' does not represent the will in any Kantian sense but is the expression of her strongest feeling or desire. When called upon to exert her will in a situation where morality comes into play she is quite powerless. She instinctively feels it would be wrong to marry Grandcourt when she meets his mistress Mrs Glasher, and she flees from him to the continent, but this quasi-moral decision is gradually eroded by pressure of circumstances. Never having exercised her will in opposition to strong feeling or self-interest, she finds she has little power to resist. When Grandcourt sends her a letter asking if he may call, she knows 'a moment of choice was come' (*DD*, 247). Again her will is powerless and she drifts into acceptance: 'She seemed to herself to be, after all, only drifted towards the tremendous decision: – but drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand' (*DD*, 257). One is reminded of Maggie Tulliver's temporary loss of moral control when she allows herself to drift down river with Stephen. Ironically Gwendolen Harleth, a committed believer in the power of the will, makes the most important decision of her life by allowing her will to lapse.

It is clear, then, that the word 'will' is used in two senses in Eliot's fiction: in Kant's sense as the means of making moral decisions even in the face of inclination, as with Maggie Tulliver, and in the opposite sense as the expression of one's strongest feeling or impulse, as with Lydgate, Gwendolen and several of Eliot's other egotists. One should, of course, be aware of these differences when interpreting the word in her novels.

Although I have suggested that Eliot greatly respected Kant's moral theory, there is a fundamental difference between them. Kant's morality is grounded in the 'moral law' and the concept of 'duty' that is derived from it, and though he does not spell out what actions are right and what are wrong (though he did claim it was never right to tell a lie) by implication the 'moral law' has a metaphysical or, more exactly, religious basis. Eliot was not a religious believer,

though she respected those who were believers, and she was opposed to metaphysical philosophy. In her essay 'The Future of German Philosophy' she associates Kant with German metaphysics, and asserts that 'philosophy must renounce metaphysics'.<sup>16</sup> One has then to ask on what grounds she supports a Kantian moral position. Does she have a non-metaphysical basis for making Kantian moral judgements and choices? In relation to what should one exercise the will to take rational moral decisions if one rejects the metaphysical? Some insight into this question may emerge from a further consideration of *The Mill on the Floss*.

What prevents Maggie Tulliver from accepting the love of Stephen Guest is that she could not reconcile such acceptance with the values and duties which belong to her past. Though she does use religious language at times – 'I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God' (*MF*, 476) – this has much less force than her human sense of responsibility towards others. She repeatedly stresses responsibility towards others as what motivates her to resist the power of inclination: 'I can't believe in a good for you ... that we both feel is a wrong towards others' (*MF*, 477). She also asserts that she must remain true to values such as constancy and faithfulness towards others if she is to possess a sense of wholeness of self. Desires and impulses which threaten continuity of self must be resisted. Authentic moral choice is therefore an action or decision that emanates from her sense of whole self. She tells Stephen, 'My whole soul has never consented; it does not consent now' (*MF*, 479). When Stephen asserts that they must reject past ties because it is the first time they have loved with their 'whole heart and soul', she replies, 'No – not with my whole heart and soul, Stephen ... I have never consented to it with my whole mind' (*MF*, 476). This reference to her 'whole mind' indicates that her sense of whole self includes rationality as well as feeling and implies that rationality has an essential role to play in moral choice. If she chose Stephen she 'must for ever sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse' (*MF*, 471).

Although the past is central to one's sense of whole self, Eliot does not see it as a force that should be adhered to passively. There must be consent to past ties and duties. They are not causally determining; the self must feel that it is free to choose them and to defend them rationally. Previous critics have tended to see the past in Eliot's work as existing in a static relationship with the self. To refer to the 'authority of the past' or the 'worship of the past'<sup>17</sup> is misleading since the concept of the whole self implies that there is selection from the past in order to arrive at, in effect, construct, the sense of whole self; there is no passive submission to the past for its own sake, and aspects of the past may be rejected on rational grounds. For example, in *Daniel Deronda*, Catherine Arrowpoint makes a choice which on the surface is opposed to Maggie Tulliver's when she rejects the claims of her family and chooses to marry Klesmer. Her parents urge her to reject Klesmer and be true to family duty and those values that her parents believe in. A crude and unconscious

caricature of Kant's moral philosophy governs Catherine's mother's argument, as is indicated by her Kantian language: 'A woman in your position has serious duties. Where duty and inclination clash, she must follow duty' (*DD*, 210). But there is no contradiction between Maggie and Catherine. Rationality plays an important role in their relation to the past and to the duties and values they have derived from it. A sense of whole self may involve rejecting aspects of the past as well as accepting them. Catherine's parents want her to take account of her class status and wealth in regard to whom she marries, but she has little respect for those and feels that she is free to reject them: 'I am sorry to hurt you, mamma. But I will not give up the happiness of my life to ideas that I don't believe in and customs I have no respect for' (*DD*, 210). 'Respect' is an important concept for Kant, which he sees as arising from the 'moral law'. Yet Catherine is not asserting that love should be overriding in all circumstances, in the manner of Stephen Guest: 'I feel at liberty to marry the man I love and think worthy, unless a higher duty forbids' (*DD*, 210). Rationality is central to the sense of feeling free to choose. To adhere to her parents' concept of duty would be to be false to her sense of whole self. But clearly Maggie's situation is much more difficult than Catherine's as her past is so beset with conflict and divided loyalties that for most of the novel she has no secure sense of whole self and only eventually attains that sense as a result of the crisis created by her inadvertent elopement, and even then she remains vulnerable to doubt and temptation as when she later receives a letter in which Stephen tells her of his suffering. She struggles to resist before recovering her moral will and 'the sense of contradiction with her past self in her moments of strength and clearness' (*MF*, 514).

In *Middlemarch* Eliot refers to the idea of 'persistent self', which is obviously strongly related to the sense of whole self. After the passage I quoted earlier about Lydgate's passion for Laure, there is the following comment: 'Strange, that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights, behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us' (*M*, 151). Lydgate's will has never taken account of any sense of persistent self in his actions and decisions: 'He had two selves within him apparently, and they must learn to accommodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments' (*M*, 150–1). In contrast we see characters like Dorothea and Mary Garth resisting impulse or pressure of circumstances to act in keeping with their persistent selves, as when Dorothea overcomes her resentful impulse after she has seen Ladislav and Rosamond together in what looks like a compromising situation and recovers consciousness of the feelings that motivated her to visit Rosamond in the first place. Mary Garth similarly refuses to give way to Featherstone's order that she burn his will even though he tries to force her to obey him and offers her money. She makes a rational decision in keeping with the values in which she has been brought up. Even when she finds out later that Fred Vincy may have lost heavily as a result of

her decision she still believes that she did the right thing. Ladislav also acts in relation to his sense of persistent self when he resists Bulstrode's offer of money despite the fact that in his circumstances money would be very useful to him: 'My unblemished honour is important to me. It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connexions' (*M*, 615).

I have suggested that Eliot is opposed to impulse, but this needs to be qualified. As with 'will' one needs to take care when 'impulse' is used in her fiction. Though well aware of the dangers of impulse overpowering rational choice, when it is aligned with the sense of persistent self it is treated positively. The danger of impulse is clear in the final story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'Janet's Repentance': 'There are moments when by some strange impulse we contradict our past selves – fatal moments, when a fit of passion, like a lava stream, lays low the work of half our lives.'<sup>18</sup> But Janet's impulse to confess to Tryan is one that is consistent with her persistent self: 'The impulse to confession almost always requires the presence of a fresh ear and a fresh heart; and in our moments of spiritual need, the man to whom we have no tie but our common nature, seems nearer to us than mother, brother, or friend' (*SCL*, 351). Tryan's impulse to tell Janet of his past life is similarly positive: 'Yet he hesitated; as we tremble to let in the daylight on a chamber of relics which we have never visited except in curtained silence. But the first impulse triumphed' (*SCL*, 358). Impulse also governs Ladislav's rejection in *Middlemarch* of Bulstrode's money: 'The impulse within him was to reject the disclosed connection' (*M*, 613).

The idea of whole self or persistent self is not present in Kant's writing on morality though not, I think, out of keeping with it. On the surface it may appear to be a concept without philosophical substance, but there is a similarity between Eliot's idea of whole self and the thought of a later philosopher also interested in what constitutes free and authentic choice. Bergson takes the view that one is 'free' when one has performed an act in keeping with one's 'whole personality', and such freedom is sacrificed if one allows an impulse of the moment or pressure of outward circumstances to govern one's actions. In *Time and Free Will*, he describes the performance of a free action in the following way:

For the action which has been performed does not then express some superficial idea, almost external to ourselves, distinct and easy to account for: it agrees with the whole of our intimate feelings, thoughts and aspirations, with that particular conception of life which is the equivalent of all our past experience, in a word, with our personal idea of happiness and honour.

He goes on to say,

In short, we are free when our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it, when they have that indefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his work ... In a word, if it is agreed to call every act free which springs from the self and from the self alone, the act which bears the mark of our personality is truly free, for our self alone will lay claim to its paternity.<sup>19</sup>

It is not my intention to lay great emphasis on the parallels between Eliot and Bergson, no doubt there are important distinctions to be made, but it is interesting that a later philosopher took the view that authentic actions must issue from a sense of the whole self.

My main purpose, however, has been to show that Kant's moral philosophy influenced Eliot's ethical thought and that this has not been sufficiently taken into account by previous critics in considering her thought and fiction. It would, however, be simplistic to describe Eliot as a Kantian without serious qualification. She is suspicious of the conceptual oppositions that govern Kant's thinking in relation to philosophical questions. In her essay 'The Future of German Philosophy', she writes that 'Kant ... was mistaken in regarding synthetical and analytical judgments as two distinct classes'.<sup>20</sup> Although she makes use of Kant's opposition between rationality and inclination in her moral thought, for her the separation between the two cannot be fully sustained. There are numerous examples in her work of characters who believe they are being rational but merely use rationality to justify actions that reflect their inclinations. Tito Melema in *Romola* is probably the most notorious example. For Eliot, the ego cannot be left out of account as is clear from her many statements on the subject, as in *Middlemarch*: 'the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief' (*M*, 513). The narrator provides an example of how duty can be corrupted by the ego so that it becomes identified with inclination in an ironical account of Casaubon's attempt to prevent, after his death, a marriage between Dorothea and Ladislaw: 'The human soul moves in many channels, and Mr Casaubon, we know, had a sense of rectitude and an honourable pride in satisfying the requirements of honour, which compelled him to find other reasons for his conduct than those of jealousy and vindictiveness' (*M*, 415).

Reason, rationality and concepts such as duty and honour are always at risk from the ego infiltrating them and subverting them from within. But this does not lead Eliot to embrace scepticism. It may not be easy to keep the rational separate from self-interest or to have secure knowledge of one's whole self, but this does not devalue Kantian moral philosophy, which she sees as an indispensable aid in motivating human beings, when faced with the necessities of action and choice, to resist impulses of the moment, pressure of circumstances and the inevitable and continual presence of inclination. Psychology inevitably comes into play and complicates Kantian moral thinking, but it should not lead to philosophy being discarded, and it is this unresolved and unresolvable tension between the two that gives Eliot's fiction much of its power. There is a significant difference from Kant, however, as I shall discuss in a later chapter, as her fiction shows that moral choice cannot be totally secure and thus free of anxiety since future events may reveal that a different choice could or should have been made. Whereas time is not relevant for Kant in regard to the ethical, for Eliot the ethical cannot completely exclude the temporal.



Although Eliot may have expected part of her readership to notice the Kantian connections in *The Mill on the Floss*, she would not have expected the great majority of her readers to be aware of them. Indeed it is likely she would have felt that she had failed in artistic terms if readers were able to translate the human dilemma into an issue of moral philosophy. Even for readers who recognized the Kantian connection, it should not be separable from the concrete human situation that is depicted. It is likely that she would not have had any objection to the controversy this part of the novel has aroused as it could be seen as a sign that she had succeeded by artistic means in involving her readers fully in both a human and a philosophical issue in which the two were not perceived as separable, even if she might have disagreed with many readings of 'The Great Temptation' section. Though for Eliot certain intellectual issues were so important that in writing about them she was clearly prepared to risk 'laps[ing] from the picture to the diagram' – notably with *The Spanish Gypsy* and at times in her fiction, for example, with the debate at the Philosophers club in Chapter 42 of *Daniel Deronda* – the ideal was to integrate fully intellectuality and art. T. S. Eliot famously identified a 'dissociation of sensibility' in the period from the mid-seventeenth century – before which he claimed it was possible for there to be 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling'<sup>21</sup> – up to his own time. For T. S. Eliot one of the major aims of modernism was to create literary forms that could overcome this dissociation. Many critics hostile to George Eliot have in effect claimed that much of her work is characterized by such a dissociation, but in my view *The Mill on the Floss* refutes such a claim since the power of feeling and sensuous apprehension is undeniable yet the presence of the intellectual, the analytical and the philosophical is equally undeniable, so that they are finally inseparable. As both intellectual and literary artist, Eliot was well aware of the danger that art could be compromised by intellectuality, and I shall now focus on her devotion to literature as art and her effort to fuse intellectuality and the literary, anticipating T. S. Eliot, and suggest that some of the means and methods she adopted look forward to modernism in several respects.

# The Role of the Narrator in Eliot's Fiction, Especially *Middlemarch*

## I

Almost all readers of George Eliot's novels have tended to identify the narrator with the author herself. As early as 1872 Edward Dowden suggested that the narrator should be seen as the author's 'second self',<sup>1</sup> but in practice critics have been content to regard the narrator as George Eliot. For example, Michael Mason writes, 'George Eliot intervenes in her own person in *Middlemarch* more than in any previous novel.'<sup>2</sup> This attitude to the narrator has encouraged the view, still common among many readers, that 'George Eliot' intrudes too often in her own person and so interferes with the reader's response. These 'intrusions' are seen as signs of an excessive moralism or of a reluctance to let the novel speak for itself. The use of the term 'omniscient narrator' has encouraged the identification of the narrator with the author since only the author could possess 'omniscient' knowledge of her imaginary world. I shall argue, however, that the narrator should be seen as an integral part of the structure of her novels and that a fuller understanding of her fiction depends on this being taken into account.

One of the most important critical statements Eliot ever made and one which deserves frequent quotation is to be found in a letter she wrote to John Blackwood. It expresses her fear that Alexander Main's book of extracts from her work, which includes many passages in which the narrator addresses the reader, might make it appear that her novels were not artistic wholes:

If it were true I should be quite stultified as an artist. Unless my readers are moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have sinned against my own laws. (*Letters*, V, 458–9, emphasis in original)

Significantly she refers to herself as an artist and not merely as a novelist. It seems clear that she intended the narrator's comments and 'intrusions' to be part of the overall artistic structure of her fiction. If this is a correct interpretation, then it is important to study the role the narrator plays in the structure of her novels rather than to identify the narrator with Eliot as author.

One fact which suggests that Eliot desired to separate herself from the narrator is that in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* the narrator is clearly indicated to be male. In the novels that followed there are no gendered references to the narrator, though in her last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the narrator is openly dissociated from Eliot as author, being characterized as 'a bachelor, without domestic distractions of any sort' (*ITS*, 3). All of this suggests that throughout her work she intends the narrator to be separate from her as author. A more important fact related to this is that in her fiction the narrator is represented as a historical novelist writing about what for 'him' or 'her' are real people and events. This is so even in the notorious Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little'. Although at first the author seems to be narrating in her own person and to be addressing the reader as if they both accept the novel as a pure fiction with imaginary characters, we read later in the same chapter, 'But I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age' (*AB*, 179). Unless one regards Eliot as untypically confused, the narrator must be writing a novel about people 'he' has known or been told about. This is also true of the other novels. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the first chapter consists of the narrator remembering a historically real scene with real people: 'Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago' (*MF*, 8–9). In *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, the narrator refers to the novel as a history and himself or herself as a historian. In *Middlemarch*, for example, there is the following passage:

We belated historians must not linger after his [Fielding's] example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (*M*, 139)

And in Chapter 9 of *Daniel Deronda*, the narrator states:

But let it be observed, nothing is here narrated of human nature generally: the history in its present stage concerns only a few people in a corner of Wessex – whose reputation, however, was unimpeached, and who, I am in the proud position of being able to state, were all on visiting terms with persons of rank. (*DD*, 76)

In *Middlemarch*, as in *Adam Bede*, the characters are real people for the narrator: '(pardon these details for once – you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth)' (*M*, 231).

*Romola* is especially interesting in this connection since the narrator obviously cannot appear both to be contemporary with the reader and to have known the characters as real people, as the action takes place in the

late fifteenth century. If the narrator is merely the 'omniscient' author, then this should present no problems. The period concerned should not affect the author's intimate knowledge of the minds of her characters. But if, as I am arguing, the narrator is to be seen as part of the fiction, then there is a difficulty, for how could the narrator have gained such knowledge of the minds of characters who existed in a historically remote era? All of Eliot's other novels were situated in periods which would have made it possible for a narrator contemporary with the novels' first readers to have known the characters as real people or to have learned about them from others and to have written a novel about them, reconstructing their inner lives. The way Eliot deals with the narration in *Romola* suggests that she did see a problem in justifying the narrator's knowledge of people the narrator could never have known. In 'The Proem' the narrator is contemporary with the modern reader but in order to tell the story conjures up the spirit of a dead Florentine who returns to visit scenes and people he had known and acts as a focus of consciousness for the novel. The narrator follows the Florentine's gaze and interprets what he sees from the narrator's own modern point of view. But it is significant that the first person is not used in the narration, although there is a great deal of comment and judgement by the narrator. Eliot may have seen such 'intrusion' in the first person in the manner of *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch* as inappropriate if the narrator is only interpreting what the Florentine sees.

In making the narrator seem to be writing a historical novel about real people, Eliot may have been following the example of Thackeray. In *Vanity Fair* the narrator claims that he was told the whole story by Dobbin, and in *The Newcomes* the following statement is made: 'All this story is told by one, who, if he was not actually present at the circumstances here narrated, yet had the information concerning them, and could supply such a narrative of facts and conversations as is, indeed, not less authentic than the details of other histories.'<sup>3</sup>

But the obvious question raised by this is why Eliot felt it necessary to present the narrator as a historical novelist writing about real people and events? Perhaps there are two important reasons: first, that as a writer who believed that 'philosophy must renounce metaphysics'<sup>4</sup> she did not wish to suggest that the narrator possessed God-like omniscience but like a historian was an interpreter of the world, and second that it is a way of overcoming a common objection to realism in fiction. Since narration imposes a form on the world it purports to describe, the narrative being a construction of the world, it can be argued that the realist novel's claim to represent reality truthfully or objectively is problematic. However, Eliot does not believe that the mind can have unmediated access to the real. In her short theoretical essay 'Notes on Form in Art', she expresses the view that form is derived from the mind of the artist and does not mirror external reality: 'But what is fiction other than an arrangement of events or feigned correspondences according to predominant feeling? We find what destiny pleases; we make what pleases us – or what we

think will please others.<sup>5</sup> By creating the illusion that the narrator is writing a novel about people and events that are regarded as real, she can overcome some of the formal and philosophical problems which faced her as a realist novelist. The form of the novel, its shaping of the reality it is dealing with, does not reflect an order which is immanent in the world but is rather the narrator's own ordering by means of a narrative that looks back on and interprets from the narrator's own point of view events and experiences which are real for the narrator. It is this narrator who is part of the fiction who chooses to begin at a certain point, shapes the narrative into the form of a novel and decides where to end. The narrator is not seeing events as they happen but viewing them from a future standpoint which shapes judgement of them. Clearly this use of a fictional narrator who is apparently writing a historical novel about real people is a logical solution to the problem of how the form a narrative imposes on reality in a realist novel is to be justified.

Eliot's concern with justifying the narrative form of her novels was perhaps heightened by her preference for a highly organized novel structure. Her fondness for analogy as a structural device has been pointed out,<sup>6</sup> and in the later novels especially one can detect numerous relationships between characters and incidents which have thematic importance. In a novel with a very loose structure, the form of the narrative may not strike the reader as falsifying reality, but in a narrative based on a structure of analogy and on thematic relationships, the reader may feel that the form is false to reality, unless it is justified in some way. Barbara Hardy illustrates this point in her book on Eliot's fiction in a chapter entitled 'Plot and Form'<sup>7</sup> in which she discusses what she calls Eliot's use of 'coincidence' as a formal device. This obviously raises the problem of reconciling realism and form. Although Barbara Hardy praises Eliot's artful use of 'coincidence' to create parallels and relationships between characters and situations, the word 'coincidence' suggests Eliot must sacrifice realism for formal purposes, for coincidence is habitually used in fiction to serve the needs of the plot and has the potential to undermine realism. Barbara Hardy does not discuss this point, but it would be easy to use the coincidences she cites to argue that Eliot's preoccupation with form and pattern is at odds with a convincing representation of the world in realist terms.

Eliot's critical writings would strongly suggest that she wished to preserve the connection between the novel and a persuasive representation of reality and would have been unhappy if the creation of a highly organized structure made her novels seem to imply that life and the world are part of a metaphysical order. By making her narrator claim to be a historian who is writing a novel about real people and events the reader need feel no sense of contradiction between the form of the novel and reality since the narrator is a novelist who is interpreting and shaping the reality he or she is dealing with and using novelistic devices and techniques in the representation of it. It has, of course, been argued that even conventional historians cannot avoid using techniques associated

with the novel. It is misleading, however, to refer, as Barbara Hardy does, to the parallels and relationships which give structure to a novel like *Middlemarch* as 'coincidences'. This suggests that chance or accident is responsible for the parallels and relationships that are embodied in the narrative when in fact it is the narrator who is structuring reality through narrative and selecting detail for artistic effect so that certain incidents and situations take on a particular significance. It is the narrator, for example, who is juxtaposing the deaths of Featherstone and Casaubon, what Barbara Hardy calls 'the most interesting coincidence in *Middlemarch*'. There is no reason why these events, considered as historical happenings in the real world, should have any relation to each other or significance, other than that the narrator sees parallels between them and structures the narrative to bring these out. But if one can conceive of the events of *Middlemarch* being narrated from a different perspective, there need not have been any relationship between these two deaths. In other words, the parallel between these events is one created by the narrator: there is no 'coincidence' in the usual sense of the term.

This interpretation of Eliot's narrator helps in responding to objections levelled against her work by critics. John Bayley,<sup>8</sup> for example, believes that ideas about the world condition the representation of reality in her novels. He argues that her fiction cannot allow for the contingent in experience and that she must abolish history as a fact in the interest of ideas. But one can argue against this that no narrative can be true to history as pure fact; ideas are necessarily present relating and shaping the facts represented, and even the inclusion of the contingent would not be outside of ideas and representation. Any writer who believes he or she has no ideas about the world which are organizing his or her narrative is merely unconscious of them. One could perhaps go further and argue that writers who believed their narration was entirely neutral and objective would deprive the reader of reality since they would seem to be claiming that there was no separation between the reality created by the narrative of their novel and reality as such. But in making the reader aware that the narrator is constructing a particular picture of reality and interpreting it, Eliot allows the reader to recognize this separation. Clearly the narrator's own point of view was reflected by the narrative, and it would be bad faith not to make this plain to the reader. Thus *Middlemarch* is full of comments like the following:

Certainly this affair of his [Casaubon's] marriage with Miss Brooke touched him more nearly than it did any one of the persons who have hitherto shown their disapproval of it, and in the present stage of things I feel more tenderly towards his experience of success than towards the disappointment of the amiable Sir James. (*M*, 83)

Not only does the narrator have a particular viewpoint and expresses opinions and judgements, but there is also no attempt to conceal the fact that

the narrator is writing and shaping a novel, for example, when the reader is encouraged to interpret parts of the novel allegorically: 'Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader's imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords' (*M*, 337).

Some other passages in *Middlemarch* reflect on the narration in an interesting way. For example, Lydgate's pleasure in the construction of scientific theories seems similar to the narrator's construction of the novel:

Whereas Fever had obscure conditions, and gave him that delightful labour of the imagination which is not mere arbitrariness, but the exercise of disciplined power – combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge; and then, in yet more energetic alliance with impartial Nature, standing aloof to invent tests by which to try its own work. (*M*, 162)

The use of the word 'imagination' suggests a relationship between science and art, and one should also remember that Eliot called her novels 'a set of experiments in life' (*Letters*, VI, 216). Although a novel cannot, of course, submit itself to tests of verification, how realistically credible and convincing it seemed to the reader could be regarded as broadly equivalent.

One of the most interesting interventions by the narrator is the pier-glass passage at the beginning of Chapter 27 in which the narrator states that a philosopher friend 'who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact', that scratches on a mirror look concentric in form when a candle is held against them: 'It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example' (*M*, 262). It would appear, however, that the narrator in constructing a narrative made up of a multitude of events is excluded from this or at least does not admit this would also apply to the narrative. But critics would be rash to accuse the novel of self-contradiction, for as I shall argue Eliot as author is well aware of the issue. The narrator, however, appears to assume that the reader will accept the statement that the scratches on the pier glass are 'going everywhere impartially' as an incontrovertible 'fact', based on science ('It is demonstrable'), which would imply that the language of science gives true and direct access to a world of fact. Critics influenced by Roland Barthes, who rejected what he claimed was science's transparent view of language as a window onto the world, such as Colin MacCabe, can therefore claim that Eliot's narration aspires to such transparency in its representation of reality, which is seen by Barthes as equivalent to complicity with ideologies that promote passive acceptance of the world as given.

The pier-glass passage is surely alluding to the common use in the eighteenth century of the mirror as an analogy for the mind's relation to reality, one which

was challenged during the Romantic period when that analogy was called into question and the comparison of the mind to a lamp was preferred.<sup>9</sup> The scientific view that it is an illusion to believe that the scratches are concentric even though they appear to be when a candle is applied to them indicates that the lamp analogy for the mind's relation to the world is a distortion and that the mirror analogy is the true one. The narrator of *Adam Bede* states that his aspiration as a novelist is 'to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (*AB*, 175). So are the scientific account of the scratches as not concentric and the narrator's mirror-like 'account of men and things' objective fact and so independent of point of view? Presumably this objectivity in regard to the scratches is arrived at by examining them under ordinary daylight conditions and observing that they go in every direction. Though the narrator appears to identify the scientific view with 'truth', what the narrator actually shows is that whether the scratches are concentric or not depends on the light that is applied to them. One should note the pun on 'light' in the phrase 'serene light of science'. The scientific view of the pier-glass scratches can be identified with truth because science by the nineteenth century has become the most powerful of ideologies, refusing at the extreme to accord alternative perspectives on the world any validity. But though Eliot is a supporter of science, the pier-glass passage implies that scientific truth can only be a particular perspective on the world, one which is produced through its own procedures and rules of operation to serve certain purposes. Truth in science, unlike truth in a metaphysical or religious sense, cannot – and perhaps Eliot as author is implying that it should not – aspire to an absolute status, so what appears to be a categorical statement of fact by the narrator is not quite what it seems, though this does not mean that scientific 'fact' should not be respected. Also human beings with their 'inevitably self-interested desires' (*M*, 175) cannot avoid having a lamp-like relation to reality, and this applies equally to the narration, 'all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web' (*M*, 139). There is thus a recognition of relativism both at the level of the individual and also at the philosophical level as even scientific truth can be only a perspective on reality.

A Barthes-influenced structuralist critic could respond that though the narration of *Middlemarch* may indirectly acknowledge relativism and recognize that language can never be a window onto the real but constructs it, this insight is not incorporated into the novel at the level of form. Though the narration may be only one perspective on the world, the reader is nevertheless denied any other perspective. Indeed, it might be argued that this apparent acknowledgement of relativism is a mere rhetorical device to disarm the reader into accepting passively the metalanguage of the narration. In contrast, later modernist fiction recognizes that relativism, or more precisely, perspectivism, is irreconcilable with the kind of dominating metalanguage that one finds in a novel like *Middlemarch*, and this leads such novelists as Joyce



and Virginia Woolf to incorporate that insight into fiction at a formal level through fragmenting narration and developing techniques such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue or a radical use of free indirect discourse which undermine the need for a narrator who is in overall control of the narrative. Of course, these techniques were not available within English fiction at the time Eliot was writing *Middlemarch*, but it may be that the underlying epistemological implications of the pier-glass passage eventually led to the development of new literary methods that attempted to take account of these epistemological implications.

Yet Eliot may still have preferred her approach to narration, for both artistic and philosophical reasons. As an intellectual novelist her form of narration allows for the incorporation of abstract reflection into the novel's artistic structure. Though Joyce, especially in *Ulysses*, is most associated with stream of consciousness, this of course is not sustained through the whole of the novel, perhaps because he recognized its limitations. As Eliot states at the beginning of 'Notes on Form in Art', form 'must depend first on the discrimination of wholes and then on the discrimination of parts', so that 'every difference is form'. It cannot therefore be eliminated from literary texts since it must encompass the whole text and so will act as a kind of unnoticed or hidden metalanguage. Can novels that adopt an impersonal narration escape from the 'omniscient' narrator and the metaphysics it implies? Such narration, especially in the modern era, employs free indirect discourse so that there is a shift from the impersonal third-person narrator to the consciousness of a particular character. If the impersonal narrator is separate from the characters whose consciousnesses are at times penetrated it is difficult to see any fundamental distinction from 'omniscient' narration. With Eliot's narration this problem does not arise since everything is mediated through the narrator's consciousness. Free indirect discourse is used in her fiction in a restrained way as a literary technique to oscillate between narrator and the minds of characters without implying, however, a metaphysical penetration of characters' minds. Eliot's form of narration does not prevent her, however, from destabilizing the narrator's metalanguage, as I shall go on to discuss, even if this is done less dramatically than in high modernist fiction such as *Ulysses*.

Eliot's major objection to neutral, objective or impersonal narration, however, is likely to have been philosophical since such narration implies that there is no gap between the form created by the narration and reality. Although more prominent in *Middlemarch* than in the other novels, Eliot's narrator is a powerful presence in all of them. But what was the objection to making the narrator admit that the characters and situations are fictional? It is likely that she felt that if the novel was openly acknowledged to be a work of fiction, this would create something of the effect of anti-art in the manner of Sterne. This might suit some author's purposes – Trollope's for example in some of his novels, much to the disapproval of Henry James whose narrator like Eliot's is

also conceived of as a historian though James does not draw attention to this in the text<sup>10</sup> – but not Eliot's. The reader might feel that the representation of the world in the novel was not to be taken over-seriously if the narrator confessed that it was purely the product of the author's imagination. Eliot certainly did not wish to create this effect on the reader and may have felt that the realistic illusion was strengthened if the narrator was represented as believing that the characters and events of the novel were real. However, some critics still associate her with a simplistic form of realism that has been identified with the 'traditional novel'. Gabriel Josipovici writes,

It is not ... that art imposes form on the content of reality and so distorts it, but the act of perception or the act of consciousness itself is never a neutral one. Proust and Homer and Virginia Woolf are all aware of this, but the traditional novel appears to ignore it. As a result it implicitly assumes that the world and the world as we are made conscious of it are one. Proust and Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, by emphasizing the will to form that is characteristic of consciousness, allow us to sense both history and flux, and the gap that there will always be between them.<sup>11</sup>

Two of the most notable 'traditional' novelists cited by Josipovici are Tolstoy and Eliot. I hope the previous discussion has shown that there is good reason to believe that Eliot at least was well aware of the gap between the forms created by the mind and reality itself, and that she tried to take account of this in the form of her novels. To be sure she does not, except perhaps in her short story 'The Lifted Veil', directly exploit this for subversive purposes or to explore epistemological questions in the manner of postmodernist fiction. The reader is not generally encouraged to adopt a sceptical attitude to the narrator's perspective on the world, even if often challenged by it, but the fact that it is an interpretation based on certain principles and assumptions is not concealed from the reader.

## II

But can one go further and persuasively apply postmodernist thinking to the interpretation of her fiction, for example, by interpreting the narrator as 'unreliable' in the manner especially of narrators in postmodernist-influenced fiction even if this was not consciously intended? Dorothea Barrett in her book *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* is critical of what she sees as the conservative ideology being promulgated by the narrator. She identifies this conservative narrator with Marian Lewes but discerns a more radical ideology in the subtext of the novel, which she attributes to the artist George Eliot, who remains in contact at an unconscious level with the radicalism of the earlier self of the author. In effect then the narration becomes 'unreliable' even if Eliot

as author did not intend it to be: 'Marian Lewes clearly intends to recommend [submissiveness], but the texts themselves subvert her intention.'<sup>12</sup>

Clearly a problem with 'reliable' narration for critics like Barrett is that the reader is expected to be passive before the text, but for her Eliot's narration can and should be read 'against the grain' as 'unreliable', which has the advantage of making the reader active rather than passive. But what may be distinctive in Eliot's fiction is that this assumed polarity between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' narration is subverted, typical of her treatment of oppositions, as I shall discuss in Chapter 12. The terms 'reliable' and 'unreliable' are philosophically problematic as they raise the question, 'reliable' or 'unreliable' in relation to what? Reality? This, of course, has been a problem for philosophy since at least Plato, who famously compared the reality we think we perceive by means of the senses with mere shadow play generated by the effect of light on the walls of a dark cave. Although there has been centuries of philosophical debate on this issue one of the most influential views is Kant's, that human beings can have no direct access to the 'real', the 'thing in itself', but only to the apparent world of phenomena. Any representation of the world that claims to be 'true' or 'real' is therefore problematic. This may be another reason why Eliot did not employ neutral or unmediated forms of narration in which the narrator is not personalized, and the reader is expected to accept the reality of what is being narrated without question. But for Eliot, though narration may not be able to aspire beyond interpretation of the world, this does not necessarily mean it is unreliable: the opposition between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' breaks down if there is no secure ground against which reliability can be judged. Eliot's narrator does not try to hide the fact that all forms of narration must be mediated by a consciousness that is interpreting the world or that any judgements of or comments on the characters on ethical, political and philosophical grounds by the narrator will reflect a set of principles or beliefs. This does not make the commentary 'unreliable' in the conventional sense, but it does not conceal from the reader that the commentary is an interpretation governed by certain interests, principles, assumptions and may also reflect divisions in the mind of the narrator. Is it legitimate for the reader, however, not necessarily to share the narrator's interpretation and viewpoint, and does the novel's discourse incorporate the potential for difference in interpretation between narrator and reader?

What Barrett's argument points to is that the partiality of the narrator in Eliot's fiction presents a problem for readers who do not share the narrator's interpretation of the world or moral judgements or political sympathies. If these readers have fundamental commitments that seem to them irreconcilable with the perspective of Eliot's narrator, then they may at the extreme reject her fiction. Obvious readers of that type would include those with strong religious convictions, Marxists, hard-line feminists – that is, readers who, unlike Barrett, have been unable to discern a subtext that calls into question the narrator's

contentions and judgements. The tendency to reject Eliot's fiction by those who reject the ideology they believe governs the narration has been seen in feminist criticism, particularly in the 1970s, exemplified by declarations that *Middlemarch* 'can no longer be one of the books of my life' and titles like 'Why Feminists Are Angry with George Eliot'.<sup>13</sup> More recently certain post-colonial influenced critics have adopted a similarly negative attitude, especially in regard to *Daniel Deronda*. Thus the attraction of Barrett's attempt to rescue Eliot's fiction from such negative critique by claiming that the overt perspective of the narrator is subverted unintentionally within the text. I will suggest that a different defence of Eliot's fiction is possible.

I have argued that the narrator is within the text and therefore central to the structure of Eliot's fiction. Although the narrator claims to be the author of the novel being narrated, the author is rather the 'implied author' who stands between the narrator and Eliot herself as the person who physically writes the book: 'As an imaginary entity, [the implied author] is to be distinguished clearly from the real author ... The implied author is also to be distinguished from the narrator, since the implied author stands at a remove from the narrative voice, as the person assumed to be responsible for deciding what kind of narrator will be presented to the reader; in many works this distinction produces an effect of irony at the narrator's expense.'<sup>14</sup> By standing 'at a remove from the narrative voice', the implied author in Eliot's novels does not necessarily subvert the narrator but gives the reader the opportunity to recognize that the narrator's perspective need not be identified with 'reality' or the 'truth' and to realize that other perspectives are possible. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* freely admits, 'interpretations are illimitable' (*M*, 25). This entails that the reader – at least a reader not fundamentally committed to an ideology irreconcilable with that of the narrator – is entitled to take a different view from that of the narrator without necessarily undermining either the novel's discourse or the credibility of the narrator's principles and judgements. What Barrett sees as 'the subconscious subversive in George Eliot' which unintentionally undermines the narrative voice is, I would argue, potentially included in the novel since Eliot's texts are dialogical in nature. This does not mean that Eliot as an author does not write from a particular set of philosophical, ethical or political principles, but different or opposed sets of principles also circulate in the text and are given their own discursive space.

When Barrett asserts in a discussion of the 'subconscious fecundity' produced in *The Mill on the Floss* by Maggie's elopement – 'Whether or not Marian Lewes intended this [that the elopement arises out of an unconscious desire to avenge herself against Tom for replacing her in her father's affections], George Eliot has sown evidence for it throughout the text'<sup>15</sup> – 'sown evidence' in the text is surely a sign of narrative control and intentionality on the part of the implied author. Another doubtful example Barrett cites as an unintended divergence between Marian Lewes and George Eliot as conscious and unconscious authors

concerns Ladislaw in *Middlemarch* who, for Barrett, is constantly idealized in the narration, for example, by being associated with sun imagery. She points out that Max Müller had seen all myths as allegories of the sun, but that the scene which unites Dorothea and Ladislaw takes place in a thunderstorm. She goes on to claim that there is an allusion here to Adalbart Kuhn's rival theory to Müller's, that all myths are allegories of thunderstorms: 'the thunderstorm is introduced to put Will as sun god, that is Will as solution, into question once more.'<sup>16</sup> I tend to agree with Barrett that there is interplay between Müller and Kuhn, but how could such allusions to these writers and the implications of these allusions be a sign of the conscious author's loss of control in regard to the idealization of Ladislaw? On the contrary, it is surely an indication of the implied author suggesting that more than one view of the Dorothea–Ladislaw relationship is possible.

Both the negative Eliot critics mentioned above and Barrett read the narration of the novels as monologic in its intention, believing it enforces a single perspective which blanks out alternative perspectives, compelling the reader either to reject the narrator's perspective on the world on ideological grounds or attribute complexities in the text to the author's subconscious rather than to the implied author's artistry and intellectual subtlety. It may be that certain readers of Eliot will always respond to the narration monologically, and nothing much can be done to change their minds. But how should readers who are less monologically inclined and unconvinced by the claim that the narration is unconsciously subverted relate to the interventions and judgements of her narrator?

Although the implied author is not to be identified with the narrator, this does not, I would argue, call the narrator's interventions and judgements into question in a radical way or ironize them. The narrator almost invariably deserves the respect of readers who are not committed to a fixed set of beliefs or principles, though this does not mean the reader needs to agree passively with everything the narrator says. For example, the description of Dorothea at the beginning of the first chapter of *Middlemarch*, relating her plain dress and the form of her hand and wrist to representations of the Virgin Mary by Italian painters, creates an image which has interpretive overtones, implying that unconsciously she is playing a role for religious effect which indirectly questions her identification with the ideal of selflessness. Most readers are likely to see the narrator's reference to Dorothea's 'poor dress' as a neutral fact and the comparison between her and paintings of the Virgin Mary as going beyond shared fact to a particular interpretation of the character. One should point out, however, that even the mention of Dorothea's 'poor dress' is not objective fact, but implicated in interpretation, since it is selected by the narrator from a multitude of other features about Dorothea that could have been chosen. The character presented to the reader is an interpreted figure, and though the reader can potentially question the narrator's interpretation, there

is no access to the 'real' Dorothea. Any description will be an interpretation, but what is different about Eliot's narration from more conventional narration is that there is no attempt to disguise this. It would be legitimate for a Christian reader to be critical of the narrator's description on the grounds that it exhibits anti-Christian prejudice, as it appears to take a sceptical view of a sincere Christian's aspiration to selflessness. But it is clear from the very first chapter that the narrator is presented to the reader as an interpreter of the world, not a neutral observer of it whose description and commentary assume access to an objective reality the reader is expected to accept without demur.

While this aspect of the narration as description overlaid with interpretation may not present much difficulty to the relatively open-minded reader, the same might not be true in relation to the narrator's numerous 'intrusive' comments of a more philosophical nature, such as the following from Chapter 21 of *Middlemarch*: 'We are all of us born into moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves' (*M*, 208). This appears to be a constative statement – one which can be characterized as either true or false – which demands that the reader respond to it in such terms. At the very least the reader may want to question its absoluteness: 'We are all of us', no exceptions being acknowledged. Nor is there any supporting argument; it is merely asserted. Many readers of Eliot's fiction in the past have felt that this kind of discourse is both moralistic and artless. But is it really a constative statement? As Roman Jakobson essentially argued in his essay 'Linguistics and Poetics', the constative function of language in a literary context interacts with the poetic function and creates an interplay between the two which prevents the constative any longer having priority over the poetic. As Jakobson famously, if somewhat obscurely, puts it, 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination',<sup>17</sup> which can be taken to mean that in poetic or, more broadly, literary contexts words do not relate to each other linearly or syntagmatically as in constative discourse – which would make them open to paraphrase and application to practical situations – but paradigmatically in that they relate to each other non-linearly or in the same temporal frame and are thus resistant to paraphrase or contextualization outside of the literary discourse within which they exist.

One consequence of this in relation to the narrator's comment on egoism is that it does not stand alone as constative statement but interacts with both the dramatic and descriptive aspects of the novel as a literary text so that its effect is integrative. One can illustrate this by showing how the narrator's philosophical comment is congruent with the narrator's description and implied interpretation of Dorothea in the first chapter. Even someone with a strong Christian faith who aspires to transcendence of self and is determined to serve the needs of others cannot transcend the egoism that human beings are born into – though the narrator goes on to hold out the prospect that at least some emergence from it may eventually be possible – and if that is the

case with Dorothea it must apply to all the characters in the novel. Another way in which the narrator's comment cannot be reduced to the constative lies in the expressive and poetic power of its language in which figural linguistic elements such as metaphor combine with sound effects, rhythm and cadence to prevent the constative breaking free from or dominating the poetic. This makes it immune from or at least resistant to conventional analysis or critique. It would be wrong to say that the constative has no force, but it can be argued that it is not legitimately read as if it were a normal piece of philosophical discourse. It can thus give pleasure to the reader of literature independently of the reader's particular beliefs and opinions. However, if a reader disagrees with the constative element sufficiently strongly the poetic function can be ignored or neutralized so that the statement then becomes open to paraphrase and abstract discussion like standard philosophical discourse, but I would suggest that if the philosophical comments by the narrator in *Middlemarch* are treated in such a manner the novel would be at risk of being taken out of literary discourse and thus seriously deprived of its literary power.

Virtually all of the philosophical or intellectually reflective passages in *Middlemarch* can be viewed in a similar manner, but perhaps discussion of another philosophical statement is required to support further that critical position. In Chapter 10 the narrator writes in regard to Casaubon's expectations in relation to marriage 'that his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment', which leads the narrator to reflect: 'for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them' (*M*, 83). Again this is an absolute statement which claims universal application and no supporting evidence is provided. As with the reflection on egoism, however, the constative element interacts with the poetic function, and it would be easy to demonstrate how this statement is integrative in its effect since it can be applied to the thinking of virtually every character in the novel, not just to Casaubon on marriage but to his life work, his search for the 'key' to all mythologies. Metaphor is also evident in Dorothea's thinking. She is unable at first to view Casaubon critically as 'he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror' – initiating the 'mirror' motif – and which leads her to see 'his whole experience' as 'a lake compared with my little pool!' (*M*, 24). Those characters who are disgusted by the marriage resort to metaphors that associate Casaubon with death or sterility, with Sir James Chettam claiming he is 'no better than a mummy' (*M*, 56) and Mrs Cadwallader seeing marriage to Casaubon as 'as good as going to a nunnery' (*M*, 57). Even scientists are subject to metaphorical thinking, Lydgate's scientific research being driven by the search for the 'primitive tissue' (*M*, 147).

Naive critics of *Middlemarch* might find contradiction in the fact that metaphorical thinking seems to be viewed negatively as one can get 'entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them'; yet metaphor is a notable feature of the narrator's own discourse, most obviously the use of 'web' as

a metaphor which A. S. Byatt has called 'one of the most complicated and brilliantly worked metaphors anywhere in fiction'.<sup>18</sup> But the 'implied author', if not the narrator, is well aware that there can be no metaphor-free language, and therefore it will inevitably permeate human thought. Allowing metaphors to be unthinkingly projected onto reality may be a danger, but the novel implies that they can ultimately serve the human good as they are a means of imaginatively changing human perceptions of the nature of reality. The narrator's use of the web metaphor encourages the reader to notice the myriad links that connect individuals both with each other and with the social medium, which is the product of historical and cultural forces that seemingly have little to do with the self. The double aspect of the web metaphor has been much commented on by critics since the experience of connection can potentially lead to a sense of liberation from narrow egoism, but if that fails the converse is a sense of being entrapped in a social version of a spider's web.

It might seem legitimate to criticize the comment on metaphor for asserting that everyone acts 'fatally on the strength of them', as such a claim would appear to be at the very least exaggerated. But such a criticism would be based on reading it in constative terms only. Hyperbole is a common literary device used for rhetorical emphasis, and one needs to remember that the constative interacts with the figural. Indeed this is one of the most artistically self-conscious of the philosophical reflections in *Middlemarch*, since the narrator apparently attacks the use of metaphors by means of metaphor – 'entangled in metaphors' – so that the apparent meaning and its subversion are enacted at the same time through being entangled; yet there is also the implied alternative meaning that metaphor is unavoidable, which the novel as a whole demonstrates.

As *Middlemarch* is, as I have argued, a novel that subverts the opposition between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' narration, it does the same with the opposition between the 'passive' and the 'active' reader, even if readers have generally failed to notice this. What this means is that in reading *Middlemarch* without such an opposition being in place the reader will oscillate continually from being relatively passive in relation to the narration to being relatively active and at times questioning the narrator's judgements or reflections. Given the assumption that the world can only be interpreted, it would be illogical to expect the narrator's interpretation and judgement of the characters and their situations to elicit complete agreement on the part of the reader. Engaging with the narrator is one of the pleasures of reading *Middlemarch*. One might argue that what is important is not necessarily sharing the narrator's viewpoint or judgement but dialogic interaction between narrator and reader. And even if the reader may sometimes take a different point of view from the narrator, the literary power of the narration is pleasurable for its own sake. If the reader may be less eager than the narrator to dismiss Casaubon's speech following Dorothea's acceptance of his proposal of marriage as 'frigid rhetoric' (*M*, 49), the description of it as 'sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an



amorous rook' has an appeal at the literary level that is relatively independent of agreement or disagreement with the judgement expressed. Although *Middlemarch* is concerned with major themes of an ethical and philosophical type which continue to provoke discussion, the power of the novel's literary discourse in which abstract thought interacts with figural language and an artful selection of realistic detail (which may have thematic significance or it may be difficult to decide so that the reader is denied mastery over the text) is what makes one continue to read it and reflect on it both at the human level of character and situation and at the ethical and philosophical level.

One should also point out that Eliot was surely attracted by the aesthetic possibilities of an active narrator, even though many readers and critics have felt that the narrator's 'intrusions' are artistically indefensible, being the product of the author's moralism or of her reluctance to let readers form their own conclusions. George Steiner in one of his early essays wrote of *Middlemarch*: 'By interfering constantly in the narration George Eliot attempts to persuade us of what should be artistically evident.'<sup>19</sup> Even a defender of her use of the narrator, W. J. Harvey, 'take[s] it as axiomatic' that the narrator 'becomes objectionable when the author intrudes directly into her fiction either by way of stage-directions or of moral commentary'.<sup>20</sup> Both these critics identify the narrator with Eliot herself and suggest implicitly – perhaps influenced by Jamesian tenets regarding fiction – that art should be dramatic. But these criticisms overlook the aesthetic purpose that can be served by such an anti-dramatic device as the intrusive narrator: namely that it detaches the reader from the dramatic action and holds back emotional identification in order that the reader is more actively involved in the narrative rather than being merely a passive consumer of it. In other words, these 'intrusions' by the narrator act as a form of alienation effect: they are designed to perform the anti-dramatic function of detaching and distancing:

One morning some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. (*M*, 275)

This is presumably the kind of passage W. J. Harvey would have found objectionable because the 'author' intrudes by way of moral commentary. But surely this passage is carefully designed to pull the reader up sharp in any easy identification with Dorothea. Readers have been led into a trap. They have been encouraged to see the marriage from Dorothea's point of view in the previous part of the novel, and suddenly this passage cuts the ground from under their feet. Instead of identifying with Dorothea, the reader is urged to think of the matter from Casaubon's standpoint and is implicitly accused of prejudice.

The abruptness of the shift in the narrative is appropriate for two reasons. First, it is an important thematic concern of the novel to show the variety of points of view that are possible in relation to any particular situation or state of affairs, and also that each point of view is shaped by certain interests. The sudden change from Dorothea's to Casaubon's viewpoint makes this strikingly clear to the reader. Second, it is very much Eliot's aim to undermine readers' stock responses and to encourage them to examine their own attitudes as well as responding to the narrative in the usual way, and this change in viewpoint helps accomplish this.

There are several other passages which perform similar functions. For example, following Sir James Chettam's outburst on learning that Dorothea is engaged to Casaubon, "Good God! It is horrible! He is no better than a mummy!" (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)' (*M*, 56). The narrator goes on to attack Sir James's, Mrs Cadwallader's and Celia's views of Casaubon:

I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs Cadwallader's contempt for a neighbouring clergyman's alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam's poor opinion of his rival's legs, – from Mr Brooke's failure to elicit a companion's ideas, or from Celia's criticism of a middle-aged scholar's personal appearance. I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors. (*M*, 82)

Since the reader will tend to share these attitudes towards Casaubon in the light of the novel's previous depiction of him, the narrator's attack on them for being based on a prejudiced point of view is heightened in its effect. The reference to 'various small mirrors' also links up with the pier-glass passage in Chapter 27. The reader is forced to confront the complexity of the reality of the situation and is encouraged to view more sympathetically a character for whom it is easy to feel contempt. The increasing use of epigraphs in the later novels also shows Eliot's interest in creating some distance between the reader and the dramatic action so that he or she can view the narrative with greater critical awareness.

Although I have argued that the narrator should not be identified with Eliot herself and should be seen as an integral part of the structure of her novels, it would of course be going too far to say that the narrator had no connection with her in all respects. But though she may not disagree with the views or ideas (at least most of them) expressed by her narrator at the level of content, the important point is that the narrator is a persona who is integrated into the fiction with a tone of voice separate from that of the author. As I have tried to show, she is a self-conscious artist who aims to reconcile artistic form with realism without one or the other being compromised, which may suggest that her fiction has more in common with that of her modernist successors than her critics have tended to think.

## Prototypes and Symbolism in *Middlemarch*

The question of prototypes for characters in George Eliot's fiction has always been a subject of interest. The publication of Richard Ellmann's essay 'Dorothea's Husbands' in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1973<sup>1</sup> provoked a long-running correspondence in its letters page. This correspondence reflected the assumption that one should look to real people personally known to her for prototypes of her characters.<sup>2</sup> But though *Middlemarch* is undoubtedly in certain respects a novel with some strongly personal aspects, it is also concerned with wider issues. To consider the question of prototypes only in relation to people she knew personally limits the novel's scope since it does not sufficiently acknowledge that Eliot is both artist and intellectual and that for her the two are not separable. I shall suggest that historical figures were a more significant influence on Eliot's characterization in artistic terms than people she knew and that this can offer insight into some of the cultural issues the novel is concerned with. Indeed, the narrator encourages the reader to look for historical parallels:

And here I am naturally led to reflect on the means of elevating a low subject. Historical parallels are remarkably efficient in this way ... whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being considered a parable. (*M*, 337)

This passage relates to Featherstone and his circle. But Lydgate is associated with the great physician Vesalius – Felicia Bonaparte has suggested that his surname is also not accidentally related to that of the mediaeval poet John Lydgate<sup>3</sup> – and Casaubon is compared with such men as Hooker and Aquinas.

Casaubon in particular raises interesting questions about the relationship between the personal and the historical. It has been suggested, notably by John Sparrow, that the prime reason for taking Casaubon to be based on Eliot's friend, the classical scholar Mark Pattison, is the name of the subject of Pattison's biography, Isaac Casaubon. The main objection to this is that it seems unlikely that Eliot would have ridiculed a friend with whom she was on good terms and remained so after the publication of *Middlemarch* in such an obvious way. Sparrow in his book on Pattison claims that the resemblance is so obvious that Pattison himself must have been aware of it but that he maintained relations with Eliot for the sake of appearances. He goes on to make the even more unlikely suggestion that Eliot intended that Pattison should see the resemblance and suffer in silence. Moreover, he admits that Pattison 'gave private "readings" [from *Middlemarch*] in his study to his

female disciples'.<sup>4</sup> This would indicate a peculiar form of masochism if Pattison thought that he himself was the model of Casaubon.

It is still possible, of course, that Pattison, in particular his devotion to scholarship and his marriage to a woman much younger than himself, contributed to some aspects of Eliot's depiction of Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon, though the fact that Eliot almost certainly would have been aware both of numerous scholars severely lacking in sensibility who failed to complete some monumental project and of many young women who idealized and married men old enough to be their fathers suggest that these characters had a resonance and a general rootedness in reality beyond particular people known to her personally. But there is surely a much simpler explanation for the use of the name Casaubon than seeing Pattison as his prototype, namely – as I shall try to show – the connection between Eliot's character and the historical figure Isaac Casaubon. This allows her to extend Casaubon's significance beyond the level of realism through implying a parallel at a symbolic level with the Renaissance classical scholar.

Perhaps the fact that Pattison's biography of Isaac Casaubon was not published until 1875, some three years after the publication of *Middlemarch*, as well as the seeming absurdity of comparing Eliot's character to a great scholar, has made such a parallel appear unlikely. However, according to Gordon S. Haight in his biography of Eliot, she had had an interest in Isaac Casaubon since 1849: 'George Eliot had been interested in the great French scholar since her winter in Geneva, where Casaubon was born, and knew his fine edition of Theophrastus' *Charactères*.'<sup>5</sup> Pattison had also published a long account of Casaubon's life in the *Quarterly Review* of 1853, substantially similar in approach to his biography. Eliot and G. H. Lewes had been friendly with the Pattisons since early 1869, and there is evidence that she was greatly interested in Pattison's work in progress. In late 1874 she wrote to Mrs Pattison: 'We are looking forward to the Rector's book – which is a great deal to say in these times' (*Letters*, VI, 97). Another letter written in January 1875 while Pattison was still proofreading indicates that she and Lewes were familiar with the contents of the book before its publication: 'Mr Lewes and I both cry out against the omission of the final chapter which must be needed as a spire to the edifice' (*Letters*, VI, 108).<sup>6</sup> There are thus strong grounds for believing that Eliot was familiar with both the historical Casaubon and with Pattison's work in progress before she wrote *Middlemarch*.

If one reads Pattison's biography one can see numerous similarities between the historical figure and the fictional character. Isaac, for example, was not exactly a passionate suitor. According to Pattison, he married Florence Estienne as much to gain access to her father's manuscripts as out of personal interest in her, and as Pattison puts it in the *Quarterly Review*, 'Matrimony did not detain him long from his books.'<sup>7</sup> His relationship with his wife is in some respects clearly suggestive of that between Dorothea and Casaubon:

He certainly complains bitterly on one occasion of her interrupting him. But over and above Casaubon's constitutional fretfulness, we must make allowance

for the irritability engendered by a life of hard reading against time. Casaubon thought every moment lost in which he was not acquiring knowledge. He resented intrusion as a cruel injury. To his wife struggling also, in her way, with the cares of a large household and narrow means, he may naturally have seemed at times apathetic to her difficulties, and selfishly ‘burying himself in his books’.<sup>8</sup>

In personal appearance Isaac resembled Edward. Of his physique, Pattison writes that ‘Nature had given him a puny and infirm frame’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 466). One recalls Celia’s comment on Edward Casaubon’s ugliness and Sir James Chettam’s poor opinion of his legs. Neither Isaac nor Edward excelled in conversation: ‘Even if Casaubon had found a Boswell, it may be doubted if his talk could have been effectively reported’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 479). This recalls Celia on Edward’s conversation at the dinner table: ‘He talks very little’ (*M*, 20). The scene in which Lydgate visits Casaubon and finds him ‘show[ing] more markedly than ever the signs of premature age’ (*M*, 416) and diagnoses ‘fatty degeneration of the heart’ (*M*, 418) is similar to an incident Pattison describes in his *Quarterly Review* essay when Isaac’s doctor came to attend him: ‘He was no sooner called in than he discovered the lines of death in the dark ring round the eye, the prominent cheek bone, the hectic flush, the sunken chest, and the incessant cough.’ Isaac Casaubon’s death was accelerated by his efforts to complete what he saw as his major work: ‘Casaubon killed himself over the “Exercitationes”... his life could not have been long, but excessive labour, joined with mental anxiety, hastened the end’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 475). Edward Casaubon suffers from similar ‘anxiety as to how far [his illness] might be likely to cut short his labours or his life’ (*M*, 411).

Isaac Casaubon’s most ambitious undertaking, his *Exercitiones Contra Baronium*, was a work of vast proportions. Like the ‘Key to All Mythologies’ it was an attempt at religious reconstruction, but only a fragment was completed. Pattison writes, ‘Of this monster criticism the volume which we have is only the first half of the first volume – a mere fragment!’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 373). He was also a man of very limited output, despite his great ambition: ‘Of all these schemes, and of others not a few, hardly any traces remain among the papers, because hardly anything was ever put on paper’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 486). Not only that, what work he did do, claims Pattison, has been forgotten: ‘Well done, or ill done, or half-done, however, Isaac Casaubon’s books are now consigned to one common oblivion’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 487). Neither did he have any claims to genius or original thought; in fact, he was ‘destitute of imagination’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 498). Of his response to the works he studied, Pattison asserts, ‘It is almost a paradox that this most successful and most thorough interpreter of the classics, should have been a man who was totally destitute of sympathy for their human and naturalistic element’ (*Isaac Casaubon*, 496). One recalls Edward Casaubon’s response to the frescoes of Raphael in Chapter 20 of *Middlemarch* and his general lack of imagination.

The connections between the historical Casaubon, on Pattison's account, and Eliot's Casaubon are thus fairly palpable. But what could have been Eliot's purpose in creating the link between her character and the historical figure? There would appear to be no clear-cut ironic contrast as Isaac has many of the personal inadequacies of Edward, made little progress with his greatest undertaking and what he did produce is now forgotten. But the difference is that despite all of Isaac Casaubon's shortcomings, Pattison still regards him as a great man: 'But Casaubon's books, whatever their worth, were not the man. The scholar is greater than his books. The result of his labours is not so many pages of folio, but himself' (*Isaac Casaubon*, 488). He goes on to compare him with Milton – with whom Edward is also compared – another man who, says Pattison, is greater than his works. For Pattison there is something heroic in Casaubon's total commitment to knowledge: 'Day by day, night by night, from the age of twenty upwards, Casaubon is at his book ... Casaubon renounced action, pleasure, ease, society, health, life itself – killing himself at fifty-six' (*Isaac Casaubon*, 490–1). One recalls Browning's poem, 'A Grammatian's Funeral', which, though ambivalent in its view of the Grammatian, suggests that he can be seen in this heroic light. An additional interest is that it has been suggested that Casaubon may have been Browning's model.<sup>10</sup>

But the reasons why Pattison regards Casaubon as great help us to see how he differs from Eliot's character and perhaps lead to a greater understanding of Casaubon's role in the novel at a symbolic level. Isaac Casaubon had worked within a tradition which gave value to his labours much in excess of any intrinsic merit of his individual writings. He was a great scholar of the second period of the classical revival which followed the first phase of the Renaissance. Pattison asserts, 'The period of youthful enjoyment was at an end; the time of manhood, and of drudgery, was entered upon' (*Isaac Casaubon*, 509). Casaubon transcended this drudgery and his personal limitations by his part in reconstructing classical texts and thus establishing a classical tradition supported by scholarship: 'To put together this tradition, to revive the picture of the ancient world, patient industry, and industry adequate to a complete survey of the extant remains of the lost world, was the one quality required. This was Casaubon's aim, and inspiring ideal' (*Isaac Casaubon*, 511–12). His very lack of genius was of assistance to him, since it prevented subjective distortion: 'His want of genius saved him from falling, as Scaliger has sometimes done, into the temptation of pursuing the striking rather than the true' (*Isaac Casaubon*, 410).

Edward Casaubon's misfortune is that the work he is doing is no longer perceived as belonging to a tradition of scholarship comparable to that of his namesake. That tradition of humanist scholarship played a significant part in connecting the classical world with a culture and civilization based on Christianity, a split which Eliot had explored in *Romola*. Isaac Casaubon was both classical scholar and a Christian who though a Protestant was sympathetic to some aspects of Catholicism and was courted by both parties,

so again potentially helping to overcome cultural division. As W. J. Harvey pointed out, Edward Casaubon's field is syncretic mythography, a study which Eliot believed had been discredited by Otfried Müller's *Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology*, with the result that Casaubon is 'lost in a labyrinth of an exploded pseudo-science'.<sup>11</sup> The figure he is often associated with is Thomas Aquinas, whose great mediaeval synthesis is the paradigm of the constitutive system which Casaubon desires to create from the study of mythology, but Casaubon's relation to Aquinas is merely ironic. The synthesis of Aquinas, the culmination of the scholastic tradition, had succeeded in creating a structure which in his time reconciled Christian belief with reason and knowledge. But in the nineteenth century, a period in which knowledge is now driven by a methodology based on scientific principles, anyone aspiring to create a synthesis comparable to that of Aquinas is likely to be reduced to the status of an Isaac Casaubon without the classical tradition of scholarship that gave his labours form and value. Edward Casaubon, in trying to create his system of reconstruction by means of a scientifically discredited method, must fail ludicrously.

Though the two Casaubons are similar in many respects, the real distinction between them is that their relationships to their cultural contexts are fundamentally different. Isaac lived at a time when a man without genius whose main attributes were the acquiring of and total devotion to knowledge in the form of classical scholarship, even if what he did mainly involved intellectual drudgery, could contribute significantly to his culture. In the Renaissance, it furthered the alignment of classical learning and scholarship with Christian belief and so helped to create a great era in the history of civilization. But Edward Casaubon, not a 'later born' Theresa, like Dorothea, but a later born Isaac Casaubon, similarly exists in a world that lacks the 'coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul' (*M*, 3). Edward Casaubon's cultural context is one in which religion and science, or faith and knowledge in its modern form, appear irretrievably split, which is partially responsible for the fragmented and 'inorganic' culture Carlyle describes in *Past and Present*. The assertion by the narrator in the 'Finale' that 'there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it' (*M*, 821) applies as much to Casaubon as to Dorothea. The various comparisons of Casaubon to the likes of Aquinas, Milton, Hooker, Locke are, in terms of the novel's realist aspect, ironic and comic, but in terms of the symbolism associated with Casaubon's name, they are not necessarily invalid for, even though he lacks genius or even imagination, had he lived in an earlier era his labours may not have been fruitless. Isaac Casaubon plays a significant symbolic role in the novel, for though his books may have been 'consigned to a common oblivion', he offers the hope that one does not necessarily need to be an Aquinas or a Milton to have a significant impact on the world, an implied anti-elitist

and thus democratic message, which is an important theme of the novel and explicitly articulated in the 'Finale'.

If Casaubon can be seen as representing someone who primarily relates to a pre-modern past, Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw represent symbolically the break from that past and identification with a view of the world that is future oriented, namely Romanticism in its idealistic and utopian aspect. Having suggested that Eliot had good reason for choosing the name Casaubon because of its symbolic potential, I shall focus now on two less obvious historical prototypes that are also exploited symbolically, and again a name serves as a clue. Dorothea's 'ardour' is stressed throughout and this is a very Romantic quality, obviously associated with Shelley, the most idealistic of the Romantics. Her enthusiasm to play a great part in the world and her willingness to trust feeling rather than reason characterize her as a Romantic. Ladislaw is more directly associated with Romanticism but initially is drawn to its more individualistic aspect. He has been educated in Heidelberg, one of the centres of German Romanticism; he is twice compared to Shelley by Mr Brooke: 'He seems to me a kind of Shelley ... he has the same sort of enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation' (*M*, 355–6) and is also associated with Byron, being described by Mrs Cadwallader as '[a] sort of Byronic hero' (*M*, 375). His flamboyant appearance and his having taken drugs connect him with Romantic individualism. The following dialogue between them on what it means to be a poet illustrates their Romantic qualities but also differences between them:

'To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion – a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only.'

'But you leave out the poems,' said Dorothea. 'I think they are wanted to complete the poet. I understand what you mean about knowledge passing into feeling, for that seems to be just what I experience. But I am sure I could never produce a poem.' (*M*, 220–21)

In a novel in which names are important, the name 'Dorothea' is a clue to a historical prototype for the character. With her Romantic qualities but not being a poet, one may be reminded of another Dorothea, one of the great female figures of the German Romantic movement, Dorothea Schlegel – a novelist and translator – though not very well known currently in the English-speaking world. I shall suggest that connections between Eliot's Dorothea and Dorothea Schlegel point to – as with Edward and Isaac Casaubon – Dorothea's significance in the novel being enhanced through symbolism and furthermore that Dorothea's relationship with Ladislaw also has parallels with Dorothea Schlegel's relationship with Friedrich Schlegel, developing the symbolism even further.

Dorothea Schlegel was one of the most notable women of the nineteenth century. She was Jewish, being the daughter of the philosopher Moses



Mendelssohn. Eliot, with her wide knowledge of German and Jewish culture, would surely have been acquainted with her life.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly she had significant connections with the Nazarenes, who play a part in *Middlemarch*, since two of her sons from her first marriage became part of the movement and Friedrich Schlegel, her second husband, was one of the Nazarenes' main advocates. Dorothea Schlegel was, in her later years especially, the kind of woman Eliot would have respected strongly. Thus if she was looking for a historical figure to enlarge the implications of her fictional character, there could scarcely have been a better candidate.

Some aspects of Dorothea Schlegel's life and character seem similar to characteristics of Eliot's Dorothea. Before meeting Schlegel, she had married at nineteen a German banker, Simon Veit, an inappropriate husband for her. Robert M. Wernaer writes, 'Dorothea was a woman of rare intellectual gifts, in every respect the worthy offspring of her father ... whereas her husband was a plain business man, with a plain, everyday mind'.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is a broad similarity with Eliot's Dorothea, also married at nineteen to a man who has little of her form of 'ardour'. Dorothea Schlegel later met Friedrich Schlegel, left her husband for him and scandalized Berlin society. Friedrich Schlegel at this time was a Romantic aesthete without adequate means of support. Wernaer describes this episode:

She left the house of a well-to-do banker, and joined herself, for love's sake only, to a penniless literary man ... She gave him the financial support by her own literary work, she comforted him in troubles, she entered to the fullest extent into his varied intellectual life, she guarded him against the selfishness of the world, she assisted him in practical advice, she loved him with an ever-increasing love as years went by, she gave him strength and courage and hope, without which he would not have been enabled to do the work he did.<sup>14</sup>

This is suggestive of Dorothea Brooke's relationship with Ladislav. Like Schlegel he was a penniless literary man, and Dorothea's determination to marry him scandalized many members of Middlemarch society. She also had to support Ladislav financially and gave up a great deal of wealth in order to marry him. In Dorothea Schlegel's earlier life she possessed a similar ardour to Eliot's Dorothea. The *Biographie Universelle* states that she was

expressive, passionnée, reine d'un petit cercle sur lequel elle exerçait une véritable fascination, elle était belle pour les privilégiés peu nombreux devant lesquels se déployait dans son exubérance l'ame éminemment impressionnable et chaleureuse dont l'avait doué la nature.<sup>15</sup>

(expressive, passionate, queen of a small circle over which she exerted a true fascination, she was beautiful for the small number of privileged people before whom the soul eminently impressionable and warm which nature had endowed her with was exuberantly displayed.)

If these similarities suggest that Eliot was using the historical figure as a model for Dorothea Brooke, is there any indication that Friedrich Schlegel

could have been a prototype for Ladislav? Schlegel in his early career was most strongly associated with the individualistic and aesthetic side of Romanticism. Though the name Ladislav does not appear to be significant in relation to Schlegel, the Christian name Will would have been very appropriate for him as he was a strongly influenced by the philosophy of Fichte – who gave greater emphasis to the ego and will than any of the other philosophers associated with German Romanticism – and translated it into aesthetic terms. The young Schlegel was an extreme aesthete and claimed that ‘Willkür’ (caprice) was the ‘supreme, indeed only law governing the poet’.<sup>16</sup> Ladislav is also, at first, an aesthete who believes that ‘[t]he best piety is to enjoy – when you can... It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight – in art or in anything else’ (M, 217). It is also the capricious nature of Ladislav’s will that is emphasized. He has no desire to channel his energies in any one direction and, like Schlegel, can be seen as making a virtue out of caprice. Mr Casaubon stresses this aspect of his character in criticizing him: he thinks he is ‘a man with no other principle than transient caprice’ (M, 42). Schlegel was a man whose interests were almost unlimited. Lilian R. Furst writes that his ‘unpredictability is that of a weather-vane, blown hither and thither by the wind of his whims’.<sup>17</sup> Ladislav has a similar range of interests. Naumann says of him, ‘His walk must be *belle-lettres*. That is wi-ide’ (M, 212). In an essay on Ladislav entitled ‘George Eliot’s “Eminent Failure”’, Gordon Haight wrote that the ‘objection most often made is that Ladislav is a dilettante’, a view that he points out goes back to Henry James and his remark that the ‘impression once given that [Ladislav] is a *dilettante* ... is never properly removed’.<sup>18</sup> If Friedrich Schlegel is a prototype for Ladislav, then there is of course good reason why that impression should not be removed.

There are also similarities between the development of Schlegel and that of Ladislav. After moving beyond the extreme aestheticism which characterized his early thought, Schlegel devoted himself to journalism and politics. He was for many years a journalist, editing *Europa* while he lived in Paris, and from 1820 to 1823 he edited the Catholic review, *Concordia*. Before that, he had been involved in the anti-Napoleonic liberation movement in Germany and took part in the Congress of Vienna. He later took an active role in politics, being part of the ministry of Metternich, and was appointed adviser to the parliamentary delegation at Frankfurt. Ladislav also gives up his early aestheticism to take a more active role in the world. He had seen himself as ‘Pegasus’ and regarded ‘every form of prescribed work’ as ‘harness’ (M, 80). But soon his Romantic energy is redirected into social channels. He accepts the ‘harness’ he had formerly scorned, ‘having settled in Middlemarch and harnessed himself with Mr Brooke’ (M, 462). He takes up journalism to help promote Mr Brooke’s political ambitions. Energies which were once devoted to art are now directed to politics: ‘he studied the political situation with as ardent an interest as he had ever given to poetic metres or mediaevalism’ (M, 454).

At the end of the novel he has become 'an ardent public man' and eventually enters parliament. Ladislaw, then, like Schlegel, is a Romantic who sets aside extreme aestheticism for greater social involvement, in journalism and politics.

The last and possibly most important of the similarities between Dorothea and Friedrich Schlegel and Eliot's characters concerns the nature of their relationship. The prime influence on Schlegel's change of views, which made him reject his belief in Romantic individualism and an exclusive devotion to art and literature to play his part in society, was Dorothea Schlegel. This is particularly suggestive of Dorothea's role in Ladislaw's decision to serve society. Wernaer describes the influence of Dorothea Schlegel on her husband: 'Through this harmonious union she exerted a direct influence on him, a gentle influence, which she tried to hide even from herself.'<sup>19</sup> It was she who was eager that he should take up a political career instead of devoting himself entirely to literature and aesthetics. According to Wernaer,

[She] had occasional visions that Friedrich would, at some time in the future, give up his literary career and take up another occupation. 'Should Providence give us a *country*,' she wrote to Schleiermacher, 'I am sure he [Friedrich] will then be a citizen.' Her visions turned out to be true.<sup>20</sup>

And R. Haym states in *Die Romantische Schule* that '[s]he became really fond of him only when he began to prove his worth as a competent citizen in a genuine state'.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, in *Middlemarch* it is the influence of Dorothea on Ladislaw that makes him return to the town and act for the social good. The change that has taken place in him is made apparent by Dorothea in a conversation with him when he is on the point of leaving Middlemarch:

I have heard from my uncle how well you speak in public, so that every one is sorry when you leave off, and how clearly you can explain things. And you care that justice should be done to everyone. I am so glad. When we were in Rome, I thought you only cared for poetry and art, and the things that adorn life for us who are well off. But now I know you think about the rest of the world. (*M*, 534)

Dorothea's great quality is her ability to influence people by the strength of her idealism, and this has powerfully affected Ladislaw:

But that simplicity of hers, holding up an ideal for others in her believing conception of them, was one of the great powers of her womanhood. And it had from the first acted strongly on Will Ladislaw ... he felt that in her mind he had found his highest estimate. (*M*, 760)

Without the influence of Dorothea, we are made to feel, Ladislaw would have remained a rootless aesthete.

If the case I have presented is persuasive and Eliot intended Dorothea and Ladislaw to be symbolically related to the Schlegels – reinforcing the underlying themes that the Romantics should reject social alienation and direct their

energies towards trying to change the world for the better, and that women, even if they were greatly restricted at this time in making a direct contribution to the social good, should exploit their potential for ardent feeling and exert influence on men for this purpose – why do Eliot's later Romantics fail to match in any respect the achievements and cultural influence of the Schlegels? The ending of *Middlemarch* has often been perceived as pessimistic and even depressing. In contrast to Casaubon, there may appear to be no fundamental barrier to Dorothea and Ladislav being capable of emulating their symbolic counterparts, but instead they are associated with 'insignificant people' whose lives are 'spent ... in channels which had no great name on earth' (*M*, 822). However, as I will argue more fully later, the role of symbolism in Eliot, as in modernist texts, is not necessarily to allow the level of realism to be transcended or elevated; there is always a certain distance or tension between the two. With regard to Dorothea and Ladislav, it is implied that the 'medium' or cultural and historical circumstance that shaped and made possible the achievements of high Romanticism has changed in the period following it; at the time the novel is set the major figures of the second generation of English Romantics are all dead, and Friedrich Schlegel himself died in 1829. But the novel also suggests that very few people can be heroes of culture and play a significant role in shaping society, and luck – a preoccupation of Eliot's as I shall discuss in detail in the final chapter – plays a part in that. This should not, however, be seen as invoking pessimism. Pessimism would rather consist in believing that the lives of those who are 'later born' than those who made a great contribution to their culture and so are unable to emulate their achievements are inevitably failures. The idealism of the Romantics is not worthless or devalued by being manifested at a more ordinary cultural level for, as the narrator states, 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts' (*M*, 822). For readers and critics who want the uplift of the heroic, *Middlemarch* does not have a happy ending, which is not to deny that the heroic has value in inspiring people, but what the ending implies, I would argue, is that devaluing anything less is absurdly elitist and anti-democratic in spirit.

## 6

# Anticipations of Modernism in Eliot's Fiction

## I

In this chapter I shall argue that there is a significant proto-modernist aspect to George Eliot's fiction. It is most obviously apparent in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, her most experimental work and one which can be seen as radically developing the realist novel in ways that anticipate modernism. Yet many critics have accused it of being divided against itself. F. R. Leavis in his book *The Great Tradition* notoriously proposed that its 'bad half' – the Jewish part – be cut out in order that a novel he entitled *Gwendolen Harleth* could emerge. Interestingly it was disclosed in an obituary in *The Guardian* of Boris Ford, ex-pupil of Leavis and editor of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, that Ford was working on such a project at the time of his death. It is understandable that this may have been contemplated since the general view of the English part of the novel is that Eliot's realism is at its most powerful, while an influential view of the Jewish part has been that it belongs to a different mode, such as prophecy or epic, with realism virtually set aside, so that the structural coherence of the novel is undermined. Exploring anticipations of modernism in Eliot's writing allows one to move beyond such divergent perspectives. As *Daniel Deronda* is the key text in any claim that there is such an anticipation, I shall consider in this chapter some of its proto-modernist aspects as well as wider questions related to Eliot and modernism, and in Chapters 7 and 8 discuss other proto-modernist aspects of it.

In both parts of the novel realism and symbolism coexist in some degree of tension without the one negating the other, a strategy that anticipates modernism. Two worlds, one English and one Jewish, are being represented, and this necessitates differences in treatment at both the realist and symbolic level. In both parts Eliot is exploring new territory. To find characters as powerfully represented in nineteenth-century fiction as Gwendolen Harleth one needs to look beyond British fiction to Europe, particularly to certain major novels in which women play the dominant role, notably Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Fontane's *Effi Briest*. In the opening chapter of *The Rainbow*, D. H. Lawrence describes how instability and change are being introduced into the modern world by the aspirations of women: 'It was enough for the men, that the earth heaved and opened its furrows to them ... But the

woman wanted another form of life than this ... to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom.<sup>1</sup> Lawrence's sense of women as a dynamic force for change in the modern world was anticipated by the European novels I have mentioned, including *Daniel Deronda*, linking these novels with one of the most significant aspects of twentieth-century fiction. But Gwendolen Harleth is not, of course, named in the title, which suggests *Daniel Deronda* is different in important respects from the European novels in which women are the dominant figures. However, a primary concern of all of these novels is the problem of modernity, and this is a problem that can best be dramatized through focusing on women rather than men. To summarize somewhat drastically, the modern world emerged from the combination of two cultural forces: the Enlightenment which applied rationalist categories to the interpretation of world, breaking with older forms of thought, and Romanticism which emphasized the power of the subjective in the relation between subject and object or mind and world, so that human desire and aspiration were liberated from traditional constraints. It could be argued that men, because of their minimal role in the reproduction of the species and their comparative lack of involvement in domestic spheres, had always had a considerable degree of freedom and therefore that Enlightenment and Romanticist ideas merely accentuated men's sense of freedom. Women, however, primarily because of their role in childbirth and their greater identification with nature and the domestic sphere, had both more to gain and more to lose from the human impact of modernity.

The female protagonists in the novels I have mentioned are linked by their desire for self-realization, a desire which is subject to critical examination by their creators. Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina commit suicide, and Deronda fears that Gwendolen may do so, and though Effi Briest does not commit suicide her life is clearly tragic. Gwendolen is more fortunate than Emma or Anna since she has a protector in Deronda, though at her moment of greatest crisis her protector has chosen a vocation that will lead to him abandoning her. Significantly, in *Anna Karenina*, Levin, who would have been capable of providing Anna with support and protection, has little direct connection with her life. All four women are caught up in tensions and conflicts which prove almost irresolvable.

Self-realization and the conflict it creates are strongly related to sexuality in all of these novels. Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Effi Briest are all adulteresses. Adultery is also a significant presence in *Daniel Deronda*. Though Gwendolen Harleth is not technically an adulteress her relationship with Deronda can be viewed as a form of psychological adultery, since she wishes Deronda and not her husband to know her at the deepest level. Mrs Glasher, Grandcourt's mistress, is an adulteress. Gwendolen plays the role of a suspected adulteress when she acts the part of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Grandcourt's turning up unexpectedly in Chapter 48 when Gwendolen and Deronda are alone together suggests he fears that she is capable

of adultery, which would both humiliate him and be a threat to his power over her. With Emma, Anna and Effi adultery creates a disorder in their lives, which problematizes their relation to, and at the extreme cuts them off from, both social and natural forms of order: marriage, the family, motherhood. Emma and Anna are most like Gwendolen in being strongly Romantic in their longings and yearnings, but both *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* take a highly sceptical view of the Romantic impulse: it creates a desire for a degree of individual fulfilment in life that Flaubert and Tolstoy suggest is unattainable, not just for women but for men also.

With Gwendolen, the Romantic impulse does not at first find expression so much in the longing for emotional fulfilment as in a desire for power. She possesses 'the inborn energy of egoistic desire' (*DD*, 33) and feels 'the hunger of the inner self for supremacy' (*DD*, 43). Unlike Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, who had combined Enlightenment idealism – an optimistic belief that the world can be changed for the better – with a Shelley-like Romantic ardour and enthusiasm, Gwendolen is associated with a darker, more Byronic Romantic tradition. Though her confidence in her own power can be aligned with her sense that sexuality allows her to dominate men, its power proves to be fragile when she is directly exposed to male desire. She is not able to deal with Rex Gascoigne's love for her and her bouts of hysteria, as in her terror when she is suddenly confronted by the painting of a dead face when acting in *The Winter's Tale*, are open to psychoanalytic interpretation, for example, as signs that she may have suffered sexual abuse in her early life.<sup>2</sup> She is nearly destroyed when pressure of circumstance forces submission to the sadistic Grandcourt, a man who can achieve gratification only by subjugating others to his will, in Gwendolen's case to his sexual will, which creates a murderous impulse in her. In some respects, then, the aspiration to self-realization is given an even darker treatment in *Daniel Deronda* than in *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*, and the psychoanalytic aspect of the novel creates an obvious link with modernist fiction, which had inevitably felt the influence of Freud. The open ending is also in keeping with modernism: though there is some hope that she may learn from her traumatic experiences and overcome her demons, the reader is given no assurances. That Gwendolen can be compared with characters such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina suggests that the Gwendolen part of the novel brings into play at a symbolic level a variety of themes and issues related to the social and cultural changes that are the product of modernity, themes and issues which continued to preoccupy modernist writers and were further developed by them.

Though for generations of readers and critics Gwendolen Harleth is the artistic centre of *Daniel Deronda*, as its most powerful figure, the title obviously indicates that Deronda is intended to be the central character. He and Gwendolen are parallel characters in a number of respects, notably in lacking a secure sense of identity – he having been adopted and having no

secure knowledge of his origins and she having lost her father and become a reluctant stepchild – though they confront this lack in opposed ways. Refusing to define himself in terms of ego and power, Deronda seeks a more communal sense of identity in which the self's energies are directed to some larger ideal or vision. The symbolism that enlarges the significance of his character is esoteric since it is mainly derived from Cabbalistic mysticism and myth. This has created critical concern that realism has been relegated to an insignificant role in the Jewish part of the novel, with Deronda in particular representing an ideal, but I shall suggest that a more persuasive view is that in the Jewish part Eliot is radically extending the boundaries and limits of the conventional novel in a proto-modernist fashion.

Although Cabbala figures prominently only in *Daniel Deronda* – Mordecai's idealistic vision is plainly influenced by it – it is also referred to in passing in Chapter 14 of *Romola* and in *The Spanish Gypsy*, in which there is a Jewish astrologer, Sephardo, who has clear connections with Cabbalism. Why should Eliot be concerned with Jewish mysticism in her writing? She is normally seen as a rationalist, humanist and realist who rejected metaphysical ideas, proclaiming according to F. W. H. Myers, 'how inconceivable' was God and 'how unbelievable' immortality. What role then does Cabbala play in her writing given her apparent rejection of metaphysical ideas?

Cabbalistic ideas do not exist merely in the margins of *Daniel Deronda* but play a central role in its structure. Deronda is initially an incomplete person looking for significance and meaning in his life. In terms of Jewish myth associated with Cabbala this makes him a formless golem-like figure who needs a creator to breathe life into him. Mordecai has long awaited the arrival of such an individual:

But the long-contemplated figure had come as an emotional sequence of Mordecai's firmest theoretic convictions, it had been wrought from the imagery of his most passionate life ... Deronda had that sort of resemblance to the preconceived type which a finely individual bust or portrait has to the more generalized copy left in our minds after a long interval. (*DD*, 411)

Deronda is unformed until Mordecai gives his life shape: 'It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning' (*DD*, 819).

For Mordecai, Deronda is the perfect vessel who can unite with himself as creator so that 'Deronda might receive from Mordecai's mind the complete ideal shape of that personal duty and citizenship which lay in his own thought like sculptured fragments certifying some beauty yearned after but not traceable by divination' (*DD*, 437). The transmigration of souls is an idea central to Cabbalism, and Mordecai's relationship with Deronda is explicitly seen in terms of it. In a key passage Mordecai says to Deronda:

In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may



join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. Then they will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom. It is the lingering imperfection of the souls already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time ... When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected. (*DD*, 461)

In Cabbalistic terms, after this process Deronda's soul will achieve perfection and through him the 'Messianic time' can come into being.<sup>3</sup>

The obvious question this raises is why a writer like Eliot should be interested in Jewish myth and mysticism and make use of them in her fiction, incontrovertibly in *Daniel Deronda* and arguably in other works. One can, I think, dismiss the possibility that in her later years she rejected her anti-metaphysical and humanist views in favour of a religious or metaphysical perspective. In a letter written in December 1876 she denies any alteration in perspective over the period in which she had written fiction:

It is perhaps less irrelevant to say, àpropos of a distinction you seem to make between my earlier and later works, that though I trust there is some growth in my appreciation of others and in my self-distrust, there has been no change in the point of view from which I regard our life since I wrote my first fiction – the 'Scenes of Clerical Life.' Any apparent change of spirit must be due to something of which I am unconscious. The principles which are at the root of my effort to paint Dinah Morris are equally at the root of my effort to paint Mordecai. (*Letters*, VI, 318)

This would suggest that she no more 'believed' in Jewish mystical ideas in any literal sense than she believed in Christianity or any other metaphysical system.

## II

In trying to understand the use and function of Jewish myth and mysticism in her work one needs to bear in mind two considerations in particular: her artistic ambition and her view of the novel as a genre. She clearly measured her work by the highest literary standards of the past, such as Greek tragedy and epic poetry of the quality of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and there are allusions to both in her work as previous critics have noted.<sup>4</sup> What might be seen as separating literary achievements of the past from literary writing in the present is that writers of classical tragedy or epic poetry were able to draw on myth together with its underlying metaphysical system in order to give their works layers of significance beyond the level of the narrative. Although Eliot wrote poetry, including the ambitious verse drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*, her fundamental artistic commitment was to the novel, a literary form that, though well on the way to becoming dominant, in the nineteenth century was generally viewed

as grossly inferior in artistic quality to tragedy or epic, partly because of what were perceived to be the artistic limitations of realism. How could a writer using the novel as a form possibly compete with the likes of Sophocles or Milton?

It may look as if this problem would have been particularly severe for Eliot, who in her early career identified herself with realism in a very narrow sense. For example, in the first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', her narrator attacked those who prefer 'the ideal in fiction' and declared a commitment to representing 'commonplace' and 'insignificant' people (*SCL*, 80, 81), and in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, 'In Which the Story Pauses a little', the narrator states that 'I turn without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sybils, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner'.<sup>5</sup> Yet even in her early work it is clear that Eliot was never a conventional realist. For example, in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is invoked,<sup>6</sup> and in *Adam Bede* it can be argued that the name 'Adam' is not insignificant, while Hetty's story is clearly influenced by that of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as her name suggests. Hetty is also linked in her wanderings after the death of her baby with Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Myth and literary allusion, therefore, interact with realism from very early on in her fiction.

However, a significant change takes place with *Silas Marner*. It is possible to read the fiction up to that point predominantly in realist terms without needing to concern oneself particularly with other layers of meaning. In *Silas Marner* and all the novels that follow the narrative is organized in terms of a double plot in which parallelism, contrast, thematic connections are clearly present. How can this be reconciled with realism? (In a novel like *Middlemarch*, of course, there are subordinate plots within each of the main plots, creating an even more elaborate interplay). David Cecil admires Eliot as a realist and writes of her fiction: 'They are the first novels which ... set out to give a picture of life wholly unmodified by those formulas of a good plot which the novel had taken over from comedy and romance'; yet he complains that this realism becomes compromised later, that she 'sacrifices life to art. Her plots seem too neat and symmetrical to be true'.<sup>7</sup> But whereas Cecil assumes that novelists should depict life in a way that appears unmediated by artistic organization, from *Silas Marner* on Eliot draws attention to structure and pattern. This may have been because she took the view that since form is intrinsic in literary texts and cannot be avoided, this should not be concealed from the reader. A realism based on such concealment was problematic both theoretically and artistically.

One of the main concerns of Eliot's short theoretical essay 'Notes on Form in Art' is where form comes from. She argues that form as applied to art – which includes poetry and indeed 'all literary production' – 'refers to structure or

composition, that is, to the impression from a work considered as a whole. And what is a structure but a set of relations selected & combined in accordance with a sequence of mental states in the constructor, or with the preconception of a whole which he has inwardly evolved?'<sup>8</sup> Form therefore is produced by the subject and not immanent in the object. The use of the double plot suggests that she chose to acknowledge this by foregrounding form rather than seeking to cover it up in the quest for 'mak[ing] development appear inevitable',<sup>9</sup> which a critic such as David Cecil would prefer.

It seems probable that the main reason Eliot decided to employ an explicit form through the double plot was because she saw it not as creating a contradiction within realism but rather as offering an artistic opportunity to the novelist. This may be better understood if one bears in mind the 'story–discourse' distinction derived from Russian formalism and developed by structuralist narratology in which 'story' represents the basic material of the novel that can be narrated in an unlimited number of ways, and 'discourse', a particular shaping, structuring and expression of that material.<sup>10</sup> Since 'discourse' – or 'form' as Eliot might call it – is an inevitable element in any narrative it can be used by the novelist to incorporate the additional levels of signification which one would expect to find in epic narratives such as *Paradise Lost* but which were not looked for in realist fiction because the latter was normally perceived as setting out to represent reality in as unmediated a way as possible.

*Silas Marner* is significant because there is now no pretence at unmediated representation. The highly patterned plot, the mythic atmosphere, the obviously symbolic names of the main characters are evidence of that. Numerous critics have had difficulty coming to terms with this text because it seems such a departure from her other fiction, which is perceived as realist in its basis. Yet in terms of 'story', I would contend, the novel remains within the conventions of realism; the patterning, symbolism, mythic associations belong to 'discourse'. Critics of the novel, however, have tended to confuse 'discourse' with 'story' in their readings; thus U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes, 'The "mystery" previously denied to Dinah, Latimer, or Maggie is allowed to survive in this legendary tale', and he detects that 'mystery' in the style of the novel: 'In a story where obstacles come in threes, where rain and snow have affected the main events of the plot, such beliefs [as those of Nancy Lammeter] cannot be laughed away.'<sup>11</sup>

But *Silas Marner* is distinctive only in emphasizing and thus drawing attention to the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' through its use of various stylistic and formal devices associated with myth and fairy tale. Such devices, however, should not – *pace* Knoepfelmacher – be identified with how reality is conceived in the novel, thus implying the acceptance of a mystical or metaphysical perspective by Eliot. In the novels that follow it, the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' may not be foregrounded to the same extent, except possibly in the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda*, but it is equally

exploited, and in works such as *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* layers of signification at the level of 'discourse' are built in to a degree that perhaps has no parallel in the history of the novel until Joyce's *Ulysses*, a text that takes the discontinuity between 'story' and 'discourse' to its limit, with both realism at the level of 'story' and layers of symbolism at the level of 'discourse' being taken to an extreme unprecedented in fiction. Whether there is a fundamental distinction between *Ulysses* and novels like *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda* is, I shall suggest, doubtful, despite the efforts of certain critics to establish such a distinction between the work of the two authors.<sup>12</sup>

T. S. Eliot's 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', a key essay in which he tried to define what for him was a central element of modernism, praised Joyce's 'mythical method' as a viable solution to the problem faced by the modern writer who no longer is intrinsically connected to a coherent literary tradition or to a religious belief system that can make sense of the world. This 'mythical method', Eliot famously asserted, 'is simply a way of controlling, ordering and giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history'.<sup>13</sup> Eliot no doubt was echoing Stephen Dedalus's remark in *Ulysses*, 'History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'. Though Eliot's negative view of the contemporary world may seem to exemplify the modernists' pessimism about modernity, similar – but even more negative – responses to the modern world can be found in the Victorian era, as in Carlyle's reference in *Past and Present* to life in industrialized and capitalist Britain: 'it is to live miserable we know not why; to work sore and yet gain nothing; to be heart-worn, weary, yet isolated, unrelated, girt-in with a cold universal Laissez-faire: it is to die slowly all our life long, imprisoned in a deaf, dead, Infinite Injustice ... The times, if we will consider them, are really unexampled'.<sup>14</sup> For T. S. Eliot a literary solution to the problem of modernity was both to represent the contemporary world in all of its mainly unappealing reality and at the same time through literary allusion and the use of myth to offer both an indirect critique and an aesthetic transcendence of it. George Eliot was an admirer of Carlyle – in a later chapter I will discuss the influence of *Past and Present* on *Silas Marner* – and for her, as for T. S. Eliot, the question was how should the writer engage with this 'unexampled' world. Part of George Eliot's engagement was to employ sociological, psychological and philosophical methods of analysis and critique to it, to a much greater degree than T. S. Eliot though the novel was a more appropriate medium for this than poetry, but I shall suggest that for her like him art and the aesthetic were also essential and she similarly employed symbolism, allusion and myth to provide both an alternative form of order to the world she represented in realist terms and through that aesthetic order to give the reader mental access to ideals and hopes that may seem utopian by rational standards. Her most ambitious attempt to fuse realist representation with a mythic dimension in which the utopian is invoked is through employing Jewish myth and mysticism in *Daniel Deronda*.

A notable link between Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* and Joyce in *Ulysses* is that both use the Jew as a mythic figure. At the level of 'story', however, Bloom in *Ulysses* remains on an ordinary human level, separated from the mythic and symbolic implications incorporated by Joyce at the level of 'discourse' into, for example, the culminating encounter between him and Stephen Dedalus. It has been argued that in *Daniel Deronda*, in contrast, Deronda becomes finally identified with his mythic self and its symbolic meanings. However, I think this is an unpersuasive reading. Deronda chooses to identify himself with Mordecai's idealistic beliefs regarding himself, but he never commits himself to literal belief in Mordecai's Cabbalistic ideas or in Judaism as a religious system. He tells his mother that his Christian upbringing makes it 'impossible' (*DD*, 566) for him to be a Jew like his grandfather and declares to Kalonymos, 'I shall call myself a Jew ... But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed' (*DD*, 620). Visionary idealism and Romantic irony – the latter most obviously associated with Hans Meyrick and clearly evident in the letter he writes to Deronda in Chapter 52 – coexist in the novel, and Deronda uses both in order to identify himself with Mordecai's idealism and at the same time maintain a metaphysical scepticism that nevertheless does not undermine that idealism.<sup>15</sup> It is the deep humanist content of such idealism that Deronda values, but without the form supplied by Mordecai and Judaism that humanism would lack substance or focus. Deronda as a character therefore never becomes unified with the mythic and symbolic meanings Mordecai as prophet projects onto him even though 'he felt at one with this man who had made a visionary selection of him' (*DD*, 466). Although Mordecai's visionary idealism is not undermined in its own terms in the novel, Deronda views it from an implicitly Feuerbachian perspective, valuing it for the human feeling underlying it rather than for its literal content. Where Deronda self-consciously chooses to identify himself with the mythic and symbolic role provided for him by Mordecai and the traditions of Judaism, 'it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people' (*DD*, 566) – Bloom has no awareness of the myth which Joyce uses as a framework in *Ulysses*. But I would claim that in both the intention is to keep 'story' and 'discourse' quite separate. Myth and the visionary dimension are used similarly by both writers to enlarge the significance of their narratives, Joyce utilizing the *Odyssey* and various esoteric theories for this purpose whereas Eliot mainly exploits Cabbalism and the golem legend.<sup>16</sup>

This conscious use of myth and mysticism by both writers should be distinguished from the view, expressed for example by Northrop Frye, that all narrative is mythic in its basis, whether or not this was intended:

In the criticism of literature ... we often have to 'stand back' from the poem to see its archetypal organisation. If we 'stand back' from a realistic novel such as Tolstoy's *Resurrection* or Zola's *Germinal*, we can see the mythopoeic designs indicated by their titles.<sup>17</sup>

Frye implies that myth is unavoidable in narrative, that even the most mimetic form of realistic text will have a mythic structure at some level. Eliot no less than Joyce was, I would argue, aware of this and decided to exploit it rather than to ignore or repress it, as most realist novelists have done. By succumbing to the latter tendency the mythic escapes authorial control and destabilizes the realism such novelists set out to create.

Although critics have claimed that Eliot flirted in her fiction to varying degrees with the romance tradition which tends to incorporate myth directly within 'story', I would suggest that though an admirer of a writer of romance such as Hawthorne, she resists such an incorporation. The link is more strongly with Joyce since neither realism nor myth or symbolism dominate: they interact but have their own integrity. The main exception with Eliot is *Romola*, which she conceived as a 'historical romance', adopting that term from Lewes. Felicia Bonaparte, who admires it more than any of Eliot's other novels, writes, 'For *Romola* is not merely a poetic novel, but in its entirety, a poem' and goes on to say that 'Eliot did not draw [*Romola*] realistically but in epic and heroic [sic] proportions'.<sup>18</sup> Realism is thus largely controlled by myth and symbolism. However, this was not Eliot's original intention, as only certain scenes 'were by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolical elements', but something she was forced into by allowing the romance mode to dominate over realism: 'You are right in saying that *Romola* is ideal – I feel it acutely in the reproof of my own soul in constantly getting from the image it has made ... The various *strands* of thought I had to work out forced me into a more ideal treatment of *Romola* than I had foreseen at the outset' (*Letters*, IV, 103–4, emphasis in original). In Eliot's fiction in general there is a tension between the realist dimension and the symbolic or mythic dimension and she exploits this, and here I would suggest she anticipates modernists like Joyce and T. S. Eliot. In generally ignoring this tension Eliot's critics have tended to misunderstand the nature of her fiction and have often consequently underestimated its artistic power.

With *Daniel Deronda* many critics have contended that the main Jewish characters belong to the world of romance, in effect being, in narratological terms, symbolically conceived at the level of 'story'. I believe this is a misreading. Deronda unlike *Romola* was never intended to be an ideal figure and, despite the claims of numerous critics, is in my view convincingly represented at the realist level. At a symbolic level Deronda has messianic associations as the person chosen by Mordecai to create a nation for the Jews, so symbolically Deronda offers hope of overcoming the recalcitrant reality that stands in the way of this idealistic vision, which one should stress was generally regarded at the time the novel was written as virtually unachievable. But at the level of realism Deronda is not typically heroic since he is a highly sceptical introvert lacking in the confidence and single-mindedness that one would expect of someone able to found a nation. He defines himself self-consciously in terms of Mordecai's vision of him but does not commit himself to full belief in it and is

even worried that Mordecai may be merely a fanatic. The main point I want to make, however, is that as with modernists such as Joyce or T. S. Eliot, there is a distancing effect between the realist dimension and the symbolic or mythic one. For George Eliot, at least, both have literary value but they remain incongruent. Another way of putting this might be that in both her work and that of the modernists allegory is being employed rather than symbolism, making use of Paul de Man's distinction between the two:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.<sup>19</sup>

### III

In marked contrast to being connected with modernism, Eliot has been grouped with writers whose practice is entirely different, such as John Buchan and Kipling, whose representation of Jews is constructed to serve their ideological purposes.<sup>20</sup> Unlike such writers Eliot is self-consciously aware that any literary representation of Jews will be a construction. The narrative of *Daniel Deronda* itself is preoccupied with construction, to which the reader is alerted as early as the epigraph to Chapter 1: 'Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit.' Most radically Deronda is represented as constructing his own identity as a Jew. He does not view Jewish identity in essentialist terms, while for Jews such as Mordecai and Mirah it does have an essence, primarily determined by racial origins. When Deronda's Jewish parentage comes to light he is accepted as a Jew by them and would not have been accepted otherwise, but for him his Jewish identity is not caused or brought into being by his Jewish origins but precedes them as he wants to be a Jew before he knows he is, so that causality appears to work in reverse, an idea Hans Meyrick playfully alludes to in his letter to Deronda when he discusses 'the present causes of past effects' (*DD*, 549). However, one cannot arbitrarily choose an identity for oneself, as Don Silva tries to do with disastrous effect in *The Spanish Gypsy* because of his love for the Gypsy, Fedalma. Although love for Mirah also marks the beginning of Deronda's interest in Jewishness, more than that is needed for him to take on a Jewish identity, such as his desire for partiality and purpose in his life and his sympathy with Mordecai's ideals, and especially an intense process of education that involves an immersion in Jewish religion and culture. If Eliot had written the novel a century later one could imagine a plot in which Deronda's origins turned out not to be Jewish and that this made no difference to his sense of Jewishness or his commitment to the recovery of

Jewish nationhood, identity for him being constructed, chosen, committed to and not hypostasized.

Eliot recognizes that as soon as the word 'Jew' is mentioned, construction takes over and that there is no position one can adopt that is free from construction.<sup>21</sup> Such an awareness is absent in the representations of Jews by writers such as Buchan, who lack her literary self-consciousness and merely identify their constructions with reality. Eliot's literary construction is clearly directed to certain ends, notably her support for cultural relativism and an organicist social philosophy based on shared assumptions and values that can resist the forces of social and psychological alienation, but it is also able to accommodate different perspectives that are granted their own discursive space: Deronda's mother and Pash – one a rebel against Judaism and traditional Jewish values, the other a believer in Jewish assimilation – are allowed to defend their positions in their own words, as are Klesmer who places art above racial considerations and Meyrick who is allowed a five-page letter to present his radically sceptical viewpoint. The literary discourse of a writer like Eliot, with its self-consciousness about narrative construction, its dialogism, its employment of allegory as a literary device, exposes the limitations of a critique that associates her with writers who signally lack her level of literary sophistication.

Yet when writers of the past, such as Spenser or Milton, used symbolism or allegory, its meaning was underpinned by a metaphysical belief system, namely Christianity. For a post-Romantic novelist who was unable to accept metaphysical belief systems, how was it possible to enrich a narrative in the way that Spenser or Milton had done by means of such a belief system? Here the writer whom one can most appropriately compare with Eliot in this context might be, perhaps even more than Joyce or T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, a writer who wished to emulate the great poets of the past but who believed he was at a serious disadvantage since he felt cut off from the levels of signification available to poets who accepted a systematic set of ideas that could account for every element in the universe. Faced with this deprivation, Yeats decided to create his own system and correspondent mythology, exemplified in *A Vision*, from combining a variety of elements, such as Blakean ideas and theosophy. Whether Yeats actually 'believed' in his system in any literal sense is doubtful. The important thing for him was that it provided the basis for a poetry that could compete in complexity of signification with the great poetry of the past.<sup>22</sup>

Eliot did not, of course, create her own metaphysical system. She did something similar, however: she found one ready-made as it were that would serve her purpose, namely Jewish mysticism. It seems clear that Eliot has links with those writers, such as Carlyle, who felt the need for something that would act as the equivalent of a belief system such as Christianity. They therefore attempted to create 'a new Mythos', as Carlyle put it in *Sartor Resartus*, or 'a supreme fiction', to use Wallace Stevens's phrase, that could provide the



benefits of a metaphysical system but which, at least for Eliot, did not need to be believed in any literal sense. Such ideas found support in neo-Kantian thought, exemplified most notably in Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, published in 1911 but apparently mostly written in the 1870s. G. H. Lewes's five-volume *Problems of Life and Mind* has links with such neo-Kantian thinking. Thus in science he refers to the value and necessity of 'conscious fictions': 'the value of such fictions appears in the aid they furnish to calculation.'<sup>23</sup> He describes science as 'ideal construction' – a phrase Eliot also uses in *Middlemarch*<sup>24</sup> – formed out of abstractions and generalities that have only a symbolic relation to the real, and he believes such a conception of science can be applied in the spheres of morality and metaphysics.

Few writers of the Victorian period would have been more aware of the demythologizing tendency of contemporary thought than the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach. On the surface this seems to present a writer who valued the mythic and symbolic possibilities of religion and mysticism with serious problems. How was it possible to emulate writers such as Dante, Spenser or Milton, whose work relied on accepting a metaphysical system with its basis in religion? One solution to this problem – the one I believe Eliot adopted – is to accept Feuerbach's demythologizing critique of religion but then to go on to remythologize on a new foundation. Feuerbach argued that the essential content of Christianity, and by extension any other religion or set of metaphysical beliefs, was human feeling projected into objectivity:

Religion is human nature reflected, mirrored in itself ... Where, therefore, feeling is not depreciated and repressed, as with the Stoics, where existence is awarded to it, there also is religious power and significance conceded to it, there also is it already exalted to that stage in which it can mirror and reflect itself, in which it can project its own image as God. God is the mirror of man.<sup>25</sup>

It therefore became possible for a writer to use a mythology and its underlying metaphysical system without having the kind of belief in it that one would expect of writers of the past. There is ample evidence that Eliot agreed with Feuerbach that human feeling was the basis of religion, but whereas his aim was to use this to present a critique of religion she had little interest in any such critique. For her, the merit of Feuerbach was that he allowed one to value religious systems and metaphysical beliefs without sacrificing a humanist perspective. One could also choose between religions and spiritual beliefs on the basis of the human feeling that underlay them. Thus it is reasonable to assume that what attracted Eliot to Jewish mysticism and the golem legend that emerged from it was the power of the human truths or truths of feeling that they embodied. Yet, at the same time, the mystical and mythological embodiment of these human truths could be exploited artistically and enable the realist novel to take on layers of meaning in the manner of major works of the past, such as in epic poetry or tragic drama.

Eliot's novels, at least from *Silas Marner* onwards, can be read convincingly as works which aspire to alter the boundaries of realism in this way. In this discussion the emphasis has been on *Daniel Deronda*, the work which exemplifies this most convincingly. But whereas in the past *Daniel Deronda* was often read inadequately by being seen as somehow failing to achieve the kind of realism displayed in *Middlemarch* or *The Mill on the Floss*, I would suggest that a reversal of this is more persuasive. Instead of *Daniel Deronda* being read in the light of *Middlemarch* and found wanting, it may be more fruitful to bear in mind *Daniel Deronda* when reading her earlier novels. *Middlemarch* still remains a masterpiece of realism, but its power is even more enhanced if one recognizes its kinship with a text which clearly draws on Jewish mysticism and associated mythology. This is not to deny that Eliot's fiction belongs to the realist paradigm, as 'a set of experiments in life', but rather to suggest that one of her major achievements was to find a way of combining realism with an allegorical dimension which greatly extended the expressive range of realist fiction and which anticipates such modernist developments as radical allusiveness and the self-conscious use of myth, and in the following chapters I shall try to illustrate this further.

## Realism and Romance: Allusion and Intertextuality in *Daniel Deronda*

In the previous chapter on ‘anticipations of modernism’ I tried to show that George Eliot’s use of myth and symbolism links her with modernist writers. Another feature of modernism is radical allusiveness and intertextuality, and in this chapter I shall suggest that Eliot also anticipates that aspect of modernist writing. Few writers were as passionately interested in literature as Eliot. Not only did she have an extensive knowledge of English literature but she also learned all the major European languages, including Greek and Latin, and appears to have read in depth the work of virtually all of the significant writers in these languages. Previous critics have discussed her allusions to such diverse sources as Greek tragedy, Dante, Milton, Goethe and even William Godwin.<sup>1</sup> However, many such studies of her writing have tended to view allusion as functioning passively rather than dialectically, and I shall suggest that there is a need for a wider critical perspective, one that goes beyond influence from or allusion to her literary predecessors but sees her fiction as interacting with the work of other writers in an almost dialectical spirit. The culmination of this is seen in *Daniel Deronda* since, as I shall try to show, it reworks aspects of texts by writers who had been crucial to her own development as a novelist.

*Daniel Deronda* stands apart from Eliot’s previous fiction in important respects, most obviously by opening *in medias res*, having an unresolved ending, engaging with contemporary life rather than being set fifty years or more in the past and perhaps most significantly by appearing to call into question the realism with which Eliot had been identified and moving closer towards the romance tradition. Yet as I pointed out in Chapter 6 Eliot herself denied that it was fundamentally different in approach from her previous fiction. Clearly if Eliot still perceived *Daniel Deronda* as belonging to the realist paradigm, critical interpretation has to try to account for what seem to be departures from realism, especially the links with romance. This raises the broader question of Eliot and realism, a much debated subject, especially in recent criticism in which she has been caught up in critiques of realism deriving from such critical and theoretical perspectives as structuralism and post-structuralism, neo-Marxism, radical feminism, post-colonialism. In particular, certain critics influenced by Roland Barthes have identified her work with the ‘classic realist text’, though this has been counterbalanced by criticism that detects a proto-deconstructive dimension in her realism.<sup>2</sup> As I have already argued, Eliot was never a naïve realist who sees narrative structure as isomorphic with the world and character

as merely reflective of the lives of real people. It is virtually certain that she would have agreed with G. H. Lewes's contention that 'Art is a Representation of Reality – a Representation which, inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium',<sup>3</sup> and 'Representation of Reality' in the medium of fiction implies structure, selection, and interpretation. Indeed it has been argued that hermeneutics is fundamental to Eliot's thinking throughout her fiction.<sup>4</sup>

In her short theoretical essay, 'Notes on Form in Art', she sees structure in art and literature as inseparable from the mind of the artist since the mind always plays a mediating role and projects structure and meaning onto any artistic representation: 'Even those who use the phrase [form] with a very dim understanding, always have a sense that it refers to structure or composition, that is, the impression from a work considered as a whole.'<sup>5</sup> It follows from this that literary realism must be a construction of the mind; yet both Lewes and Eliot would have seen this construction as being defensible on scientific principles since certain representations were equated with what Lewes terms 'falsism': 'Realism is thus the basis of all art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*.'<sup>6</sup> He dismissed Dumas's romances, for example, as 'not historical but hysterical'.<sup>7</sup> Eliot's description of her novels as 'a set of experiments in life' testifies to the relation she sees between the realist novel and scientific practice: both have to be tested against experience and the world.<sup>8</sup> Although theorists – influenced by the Saussurian doctrine that language is a system of mutually defining signs – have called into question both literary realism and science on the grounds that they assume that language can neutrally reflect the world, recent critiques of Saussurian and other anti-realist perspectives suggest that realism remains a live issue in modern literary theory.<sup>9</sup> Eliot's use of allusion in a dialectical spirit shows that her form of realism is highly sophisticated in literary terms. One should, however, point out that Eliot was not confident that the human mind could ever grasp the fundamental nature or meaning of reality and often uses the word 'mystery' in a positive sense without, however, implying any religious point of view, as in her letter to Barbara Bodichon on Darwin quoted in Chapter 1. Her position on realism can perhaps be summarized as follows: the human conception of reality will constantly develop in relation to the emergence of new forms of thinking, particularly in the scientific sphere, and a responsible literary realism must also change and develop in consequence, but what reality is in any essential sense will remain a mystery.

Eliot was no doubt aware of critical debate surrounding realism in the Victorian period and of the argument that realism and the imagination were antithetic.<sup>10</sup> Neither she nor Lewes, however, would have accepted that there was a fundamental division between realism and the imagination. He was particularly critical of what he called 'detailism'<sup>11</sup> in fiction, a merely photographic representation of objects in the world. This is closely connected with his view that in science – conventionally associated with a merely

empirical observation of reality – the imagination plays an integral role through the creation of hypotheses, which then have to undergo rigorous testing and experimentation. When in *Daniel Deronda* Mordecai's visionary thinking is compared with science – 'Even strictly-measuring science could hardly have got on without that forecasting ardour which feels the agitations of discovery beforehand, and has a faith in its preconception that surmounts many failures of experiment' (*DD*, 438) – the narrator is drawing on Lewes's comparison of scientific discovery with poetry and the imagination: 'to imagine a good experiment is as difficult as to invent a good fable ... The discoverer and the poet are inventors,'<sup>12</sup> In *Middlemarch* it is clear that Eliot was well aware that science had its roots in highly imaginative practices such as alchemy.<sup>13</sup> The crucial difference is that scientific ideas have to be able to survive testing against reality or else possess explanatory power if testing or experiment is not yet possible, and all scientific theory is insecure as new theories may emerge making science a process in continual development, which could also be said of the novel as a form. As a novelist, Eliot can no more discard the work of her predecessors, even if its realism is flawed or based on ideas derived from romance, than science can discard its alchemical past or disown hypotheses that fail since science builds on these. Realism like science should continually move forward and exploit and incorporate what is of value in the modes of representation employed by previous novelists.

The realist novel had emerged from romance narrative, and new forms of romance continued to be an alternative to realism. In *Daniel Deronda*, I shall argue, Eliot does not move from realism to a romance mode but rather revises and adapts romance in order to enhance the scope of the realist novel. Both Eliot and Lewes recognized the literary power of romance. Although Lewes severely criticized writers of romance such as Dumas and Hugo, he praised highly the work of Hawthorne and Melville: 'What *romance* writer can be named with Hawthorne? Who knows the terror of the seas like Herman Melville? ... In vain Reason rebels. Imagination is absolute.'<sup>14</sup> Eliot had earlier exploited romance in works like *Romola* and her short story, 'The Lifted Veil', and even in *Adam Bede*, a novel in which realism seems primary, the plot is partly drawn from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.<sup>15</sup> The novelists Eliot would have considered her major predecessors had combined realism and romance in various ways. By creating an interplay between their modes of representation and her own, a new and more powerful form of realism could emerge, one which might perhaps do more justice to the power of the imagination than had been achieved in her previous fiction.

Who would Eliot have regarded as her major predecessors? I do not think there is much doubt that they would have been Scott, Austen and Dickens, all of whom combine realism with romance. It might seem an impossible task to bring together the work of three such different novelists (or four if one includes Eliot herself) with their distinctive modes of representation, but I shall argue

that this is Eliot's ambitious project in *Daniel Deronda*. Scott famously saw Jane Austen's type of novel as quite opposed to his own, and Eliot herself in her discussion of Dickens in her essay, 'The Natural History of German Life' clearly viewed his fiction as fundamentally opposed to the kind of fiction she herself would go on to write. Yet if the novel as a genre is to have any right to claim that its representation of reality is a major contribution to human understanding of the world, at some level the different forms of representation of these four novelists must be capable of being subsumed in such a way that they are not essentially opposed to each other. It is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to say that *Daniel Deronda* is an attempt, again perhaps anticipating Joyce, to produce something akin to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in terms of the novel, a synthesizing work of fiction that brings together and develops those aspects of the work of her predecessors that she admires while at the same time also adopting a revisionist attitude to other aspects which she regards as open to criticism from a realist viewpoint.

### *Daniel Deronda* and Scott

Eliot's admiration for Scott is well documented. It is generally accepted that the European social realist novel emerged out of Scott. His creation of the historical novel in which character was shown as inseparably connected with a particular historical period and its concomitant cultural system influenced the social realism of the French novel, most obviously Balzac and Stendhal, and, later in the century, Russian fiction, particularly Tolstoy, and his combining of history with a narrative form based on romance influenced a different tradition of the novel, notably American fiction with Hawthorne whom Eliot greatly admired. Scott is therefore a crucial figure in the history of the novel, as Eliot surely realized. Although there has been previous discussion of allusion to Scott in Eliot's work,<sup>16</sup> the relation of *Daniel Deronda* to *Waverley* in particular has not, I think, been commented on in any detail. In her earlier novels she adopts Scott's method of setting her novels in periods of the past that were still within living memory, akin to Scott's setting Scottish novels like *Waverley* or *Redgauntlet* in the mid-eighteenth century. In *Daniel Deronda*, however, the setting is the mid-1860s, less than ten years before the time of the novel's composition. But this is only a superficial departure from Scott's historical method, for the lesson to be derived from his historical fiction is that it is not only the past that needs to be understood in historical terms but a perspective that takes account of historicism as developed by Scott and others should also be used in order to interpret the present. History is thus always with us though it may be difficult to view the present with the requisite disinterestedness that one may demand of the historian. It is perhaps for this reason that Eliot, though

she desires to write a novel about her own contemporary society, nevertheless places the action of *Daniel Deronda* in the 1860s, which creates some degree of historical distance from her material.

A feature of many of Scott's novels is that the main character, Waverley being the most obvious example, does not have a dominating presence and is often less interesting in dramatic terms than other characters. Creating such a protagonist has some advantages, however, since it allows Scott to focus on a historical conflict such as that between Highlanders and Hanoverians in *Waverley* – a conflict that was a historical turning point and led directly to the emergence of a modernized society based on Enlightenment principles in Britain – with the hero being, as Georg Lukács argued, the means of bringing into relief the main issues and implications intrinsic to that conflict.<sup>17</sup> Plot and characterization, however, mainly conform to romance narrative models. In *Waverley*, the historical novel Eliot is mainly drawing on in *Daniel Deronda*, Waverley is of a romantic disposition and is pulled in contrary directions, a device that allows the reader to know each side of a particular political and cultural conflict from within, rather than being presented with only one perspective. Both novels are in the bildungsroman tradition and have eponymous heroes. Deronda is, like Waverley, romantic in temperament – ‘And, if you like, he was romantic’ (*DD*, 439) – is reactive rather than active, the word ‘shrank’ continually being used to describe his responses to people and situations, and is caught between two different worlds. He is brought up to be a Christian gentleman, encouraged by his guardian Sir Hugo Mallinger to take up a public role in British society by going into politics, for example, but he becomes drawn into the world of Jews which is in many ways an alien world, adhering to customs and beliefs that look back to a pre-modern time.

Thus one might see Deronda's increasing attraction to Jewish life and the Cabbalistic ideas of Mordecai as similar to Waverley's attraction – through his family links with Jacobitism – to the world of the Highlanders, a culture that is dominated by both feudalism and Catholicism, which are in conflict with the modern world of commerce, capitalism, the Protestant ethic and representative government that was eventually going to lead to a modern democratic society. The clear implication of Scott's historical fiction is that there is no stopping Enlightenment social and economic thought – that is, modernity – becoming a force which will eventually dominate the world, with the result that older cultures based on different principles, such as that of the Highlanders, must finally succumb to its power. The world of the Highlanders is shown by Scott to be attractive in certain respects, but it cannot win in a struggle with modernity, and the novel takes the view that modernity is ultimately preferable. In *Waverley* the hero eventually recognizes that the Highland way of life with its pre-modern outlook cannot be allowed to win in a conflict with Hanoverian forces which will ultimately promote modernity, despite the romantic appeal of the Highlanders.

In *Daniel Deronda*, however, Eliot departs from that view by adapting her *Waverley*-type of plot so as to question modernity. Unlike Waverley who rejects Jacobitism despite his family connections with it, her hero chooses to go against his Christian and Enlightenment upbringing in order to identify himself with his Jewish cultural heritage. The view that Jews should assimilate into Western societies and identify with Enlightenment notions of progress – expressed by Pash in his debate with Mordecai in Chapter 42: ‘with us in Europe the sentiment of nationality is destined to die out ... The whole current of progress is setting against it’ (*DD*, 448) – is questioned by Deronda (‘A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life’), and he chooses to align himself with Mordecai’s proto-Zionist perspective and with his claim that establishing Jewish nationhood will serve the interests of humanity as a whole, though Deronda distances himself from literal belief in Mordecai’s Jewish mysticism. The universalism of Enlightenment thinking in both the social and economic spheres is set aside in favour of a cultural relativism that is not particularist – the ideal being Deronda’s grandfather’s concept of ‘the balance of separateness and communication’ (*DD*, 619) – since the Jews will act as an example to other peoples, and thus a new concept of universalism may emerge that will not be antithetic to difference. Despite Eliot’s admiration for Scott and her utilizing in *Daniel Deronda* of the typical plot of his historical fiction, there is therefore significant disagreement between them both politically and culturally. A critical edge to her view of modernity is evident in her last work *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, especially the chapter entitled ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’, where the narrator takes the view that the spread of European Enlightenment thinking through imperialism, capitalist economics and cosmopolitanism is promoting and hastening the erosion or dilution of specific cultures and the emergence of ethnically and culturally fragmented societies which lack cohesion and produce alienation. The Jews are valued and are an example because they have preserved their separate cultural identity despite physical dispersal, persecution, pressure to assimilate.

As Eliot incorporates a critique of Scott’s cultural politics in *Daniel Deronda*, she also revises his artistic method of characterizing his typical protagonists. Scott’s form of historical romance avoids exploring character in psychological depth, his interest lying mainly with political and cultural conflict, but one of the forces that Eliot as a realist brings to fiction is psychological power and complexity, and she aims to integrate those with the wider political, cultural and historical issues that Scott introduced into fiction. Whereas it can be argued that the combination of romantic temperament with passiveness that Scott creates in his characterization of Waverley is merely a device to allow him to explore the wider cultural conflict, Eliot’s similar combination in the case of Deronda is centrally related to the novel’s wider themes. Although in some ways Scott in his representation of the intellectually



and emotionally divided Waverley looks forward to the modern novel in which thinking and feeling would replace action in exemplifying character, Scott is not a psychological novelist and makes no attempt to dramatize Waverley's inner conflict in anything like realist terms. Eliot as a realist and psychological novelist creates Deronda as an intellectual, perhaps one of the first in English fiction: an introspective thinker rather than a man of action, reactive in his relationships with people, who is searching for meaning in his life. Thinking itself becomes dangerous for Deronda since at first he can find no reason for identifying with one form of commitment or vocation rather than another. Eliot dramatizes this condition in the scene on the river, before he saves Mirah from drowning, when he is on the point of experiencing a complete negation of any sense of self. He contemplates 'how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape' (*DD*, 160). Rescuing Mirah from drowning – the kind of action one associates with a hero of romance – is as significant in relation to himself as to Mirah as this eventually provides the foundation for partiality in his interaction with the world and shows that he can move beyond thinking to action.

Even if Deronda as a character is a major advance over pallid heroes like Waverley, many critics have judged him to be a failure in artistic terms, seeing him as idealized or lacking in felt life. This dismissal of Deronda as a character of interest is mistaken in my view, but its persistence may reflect the fact that nineteenth-century English realism lacked the technical resources to represent introverted intellectuals as powerfully as twentieth-century writers were able to do, twentieth-century novelists having benefited from such modernist techniques as stream of consciousness or a radical use of free indirect style, together with access to psychoanalytic discourse. This allowed them to represent the inner life and individual consciousness of introverted character types, especially intellectuals, with greater force of realism. But even if one takes that into account, perhaps what has distorted critical perception of Deronda has been the general assumption that he is intended by Eliot to represent an ideal, a view that will be subject to critique in this study.

Eliot certainly saw the historical understanding and interpretation that underlies Scott's fiction at its best as a powerful resource in the development of realist fiction as she understood it. However, *Daniel Deronda* suggests that she recognizes that romance in Scott is also a major source of artistic power, one that the realist novel should try to exploit. In grafting a romance narrative onto historical material, Scott had inspired later novelists such as Hawthorne to develop a romance-based fiction which allowed metaphysical or philosophical themes more direct expression and treatment by means of symbolism or allegory. In *Romola* Eliot had herself combined the historical novel with a romance narrative that had allegorical implications. Scott's romance plot had often complemented the historical conflict, as in Waverley's initial romantic

attachment to the passionate Jacobite Flora Mac-Ivor, which eventually gives way to a more sensible choice of Rose Bradwardine. One can see an echo of this plot in *Deronda's* being drawn to two very different women and choosing to marry Mirah Lapidoth rather than the charismatic Gwendolen Harleth, with Eliot, however, again endeavouring to give the kind of psychological depth to *Deronda's* emotional conflict that is lacking in Scott.

When Scott moved away from Scottish history to other periods, particularly the mediaeval period, the romance narrative tended to dominate as the historical representation was less vital than in his Scottish novels. *Ivanhoe*, Scott's most popular novel in the nineteenth century, was the first of these romance-dominated novels, and Eliot draws on it also in *Daniel Deronda*. There is direct reference to it in the text: '[The Meyricks] would at once associate a lovely Jewess with Rebecca in "Ivanhoe"' (*DD*, 165). Any summary of the *Deronda* plot reveals its obvious links to romance, with the hero being given away to a substitute parent when he is a child, being brought up in ignorance of his origins, rescuing a Jewish woman from drowning and then having his life changed through meeting a mystical Jew who happens to be her brother, discovering in a highly charged scene with his dying mother that he was born a Jew and then deciding to marry the Jewish woman and devote his life to the quest to found a Jewish nation. Yet it would be rash to conclude from this that Eliot is forsaking realism for romance. Scott's romance plot is useful to Eliot since it can be reworked in order that some of the assumptions underlying Scott's treatment can be subverted.

*Ivanhoe* is, of course, an especially significant text for *Daniel Deronda* because of its Jewish aspect. Scott's treatment of his Jewish characters, Isaac of York and his daughter Rebecca, is fairly enlightened by nineteenth-century standards, but his romance narrative is founded on the assumption that the hero will be a Christian and that if he has to choose between two women – a device often used in romance and one that Scott had also used in *Waverley* – one of whom is Jewish and the other English, that he naturally ought to choose the Englishwoman. This is radically revised in *Daniel Deronda*. Like *Ivanhoe* *Deronda* is attracted both to a Jewess and to an English woman, but he turns out to have Jewish parents and chooses to marry the Jewess.<sup>18</sup> The implicit message of *Ivanhoe* is that the future belongs to England once the Saxons and Normans can transcend their conflict and discover a shared sense of Englishness. In *Daniel Deronda* the ideology implicit in Scott's romance narrative is undermined since the hero, though brought up to believe that he is English, decides to identify instead with his newly discovered cultural heritage. Scott's Jews in *Ivanhoe* seem unfortunate figures at the end of the novel when they leave England for an unpredictable future abroad, but Eliot's Jewish characters, *Deronda* and *Mirah*, are the fortunate ones as they leave England with a goal in life whereas it is the English, confined to England with little sense of spiritual purpose, who are the unfortunate ones.

## *Daniel Deronda* and Austen

Jane Austen is as important a writer for Eliot as Scott, but there has been little discussion of connections between Austen and *Daniel Deronda*. As Eliot uses and revises Scott in the 'Deronda part' of the novel, she does the same with Austen in the Gwendolen Harleth part. Eliot admired and clearly learned from what Scott called Austen's 'exquisite touch' in rendering ordinary life and experience just as much as she admired and learned from Scott's power as a historical novelist. Both Austen's and Scott's very different forms of realism were equally essential to her fiction. Yet though Scott saw his 'Big Bow-Wow strain' and Austen's focusing on the detailed representation of domestic life as opposed approaches,<sup>19</sup> romance underpins the narrative in the fiction of both novelists, though Austen's form of romance is derived from romantic comedy. It is the romance elements in Austen's narrative structure that Eliot revises in *Daniel Deronda*, since from Eliot's point of view there could be seen to be an incompatibility between the texture of Austen's fiction with its attempt at a detailed and persuasive representation of human experience and the fact that the structure that encompasses that representation and the underlying assumptions embodied in it are at variance with representing reality as Eliot saw it. *Daniel Deronda* may be read as an attempt by Eliot to overcome that incompatibility by being true to Austen's 'exquisite touch' but at the same time undermining the Austen romance plot and its implicit ideology.

The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* which sets up the plot of that novel is probably the most famous sentence in English fiction: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.' In Chapter 9 of *Daniel Deronda* it is clearly alluded to: 'Some readers of this history will doubtless regard it as incredible that people should construct matrimonial prospects on the mere report that a bachelor of good fortune and possibilities was coming within reach' (*DD*, 76). This passage should alert the reader that the story of Gwendolen Harleth and the pressure on her to make a financially favourable marriage is a version of the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, and I think this is no accident. Another obvious connection is that like Elizabeth Bennet, Gwendolen has four sisters, though in her case they are half-sisters. As Mrs Bennet and her family face a ruinous situation if Mr Bennet dies and none of the daughters marries a rich man, so the Davilow family and Gwendolen actually have to confront such a situation after the death of her stepfather Mr Davilow and the subsequent loss of their investment income through speculation by their financial manager. Eliot takes Austen's romance plot and brings it into confrontation with her own commitment to a realist representation of the world.

Although the gravity of the Bennet family's situation is on the face of it serious, the form of romance within which Austen is working means that the reader need have no fears that the family might be in any danger. In Austen's

fictional world things turn out for the best for those who are morally worthy. This is not merely Austen following a romance narrative mode that excludes tragedy and demands a happy ending: romantic comedy is favoured by her for ideological reasons since to accept that morally deserving people could be ruined by mischance or a recalcitrant external reality would be to cast doubt on the existence of a just God and the presence of moral order in the world. No such assurances are present in Eliot's fiction. Elizabeth Bennet turns down Darcy's initial proposal on moral grounds (though based on a perception of him that turns out to be largely mistaken) without being in the least tempted by his wealth. Her moral steadfastness despite the existence of such temptation is rewarded when the stories about him recounted by Wickham, which she had previously believed, are revealed as false and he emerges as a man of the highest moral character, and though she has to suffer some guilt and humiliation for her earlier misreading of him, she gains an almost ideal husband and the threat of family ruin is averted.

Gwendolen Harleth's situation is very similar in that Grandcourt is on the point of proposing to Gwendolen when his former mistress Mrs Glasher appears before her. After hearing Mrs Glasher's revelations about Grandcourt's past, Gwendolen decides suddenly to go abroad to prevent any proposal taking place. Thus each heroine initially rejects her suitor, but Gwendolen's behaviour is much more psychologically complex, as Eliot is a psychological novelist in a way that Austen is not. It is not a conscious decision on her part to reject Grandcourt on moral grounds but more a spontaneous feeling with complicated roots that compels her to flee from this man. In *Pride and Prejudice*, when Darcy renews his suit and proposes to Elizabeth, she knows that Wickham's apparently damning testimony against him is a tissue of half-truths and lies so that he has been transformed in her mind; in *Daniel Deronda* when Grandcourt renews his suit and proposes to Gwendolen, she knows that Mrs Glasher's account is all too true: all that is altered is her situation, the family's wealth having been lost to speculation, so that accepting him or rejecting him can be only a choice of evils. Whereas Elizabeth marries an almost perfect English gentleman, Gwendolen marries a man who is a gentleman only in the most narrow class sense, without any of the spiritual content with which the term was associated in the past, and whose only pleasure in life is derived from a sadistic delight in dominating.

The most significant difference in treatment, however, is that whereas *Pride and Prejudice* ends with a happy marriage, as all Austen's novels do, Eliot's main focus in *Daniel Deronda* is on the relationship after marriage. Austen's novels, like romantic comedy in general, place courtship rather than marriage at the centre, and therefore intimate relationships between men and women are not represented. None of her main characters is ever shown as having a sexual relationship with her partner. Eliot's revision of Austen seeks to rectify such omissions. Marriage for Eliot is the central human relationship, and it is

this rather than courtship that she focuses on in *Daniel Deronda*. However, it stands apart from the rest of her novels not so much because the marriage between Gwendolen and Grandcourt is disastrous, at least for Gwendolen, but that the sexual overtones lead English fiction into new areas of experience, Eliot perhaps exploiting a new variety of romance for realist purposes, the 'sensation novel'. That Grandcourt is highly sexed is clear from his having had four children by Mrs Glasher. Gwendolen's neurotic response to Rex Gascoigne's lovemaking before she meets Grandcourt indicates her fear of intimate contact with a man. Since the mature Grandcourt is now incapable of any passionate or romantic impulse, all that is left to him is the sadistic pleasure of forcing a woman to submit to his will, and the more reluctant she is the greater his pleasure in making her submit. Gwendolen is 'reduced to dread lest she should become a mother' (*DD*, 736) and of course she would not feel such dread unless she was having sexual relations with Grandcourt. It should not take much imagination on the reader's part to realize the disgust that Gwendolen must feel at being forced to have sex with a man she loathes, and it is surely implied that consciousness of her disgust makes his sadistic pleasure all the greater; having in effect bought her he treats her like a harlot, echoing her surname. It is not explicitly stated why her hatred of him is murderous, leading to 'an imaginary annihilation of the detested object, something like the hidden rites of vengeance with which the persecuted have made a dark vent for their rage' (*DD*, 576), but her sexual degradation is surely to be understood as a major factor. Although Eliot as a Victorian novelist cannot of course develop this material, this aspect of the novel looks forward to another feature of modernist-influenced fiction: its representation and exploration of intimate relationships between the sexes.

Reworking the story of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy through the relationship of Gwendolen Harleth and Grandcourt indicates the radical nature of Eliot's revision of Austen. For Eliot, Austen's concentration on 'the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush'<sup>20</sup> was a major advance for the novel, exploring reality at the molecular level as it were and thus complementing Scott's historically informed overview. But since for Eliot Austen's fiction was limited in certain important respects, it required revision. It is significant that though Eliot aspires towards the subtlety and irony of Austen's narrator and exploits Austen's development of free indirect discourse, she does not favour Austen's mode of narration in one notable respect. A basic difference in formal terms between Austen's treatment of the Elizabeth-Darcy relationship and Eliot's of the Gwendolen-Grandcourt relationship is that Eliot moves from one point of view to the other, whereas Austen as in her normal practice limits the point of view to her main character and uses Darcy's letter to disabuse Elizabeth of her mistaken impression of him. Austen's narrator does not focus on Darcy's consciousness whereas Eliot explores Grandcourt's. It is clear in Austen's fiction that reality is ambiguous and that people have different

viewpoints, but this does not lead her towards relativism or perspectivism. Thus, Mr Collins is a fool in absolute terms; there is no room for argument. Eliot's mode of narration, however, is designed to subvert such absolute judgements: Casaubon in *Middlemarch* is a Mr Collins-like character until Chapter 29, when the narrator turns on the reader for implicitly regarding Dorothea's point of view as the only one, the reader of course having been set up, and then switching the point of view from Dorothea to Casaubon. Eliot's world, as represented in her later fiction, is one of relativity of viewpoints, and this is reflected in the movement of the narration from one consciousness to another, whereas in Austen's fictional world truth and true judgement finally emerge despite liars like Wickham and the human predilection for self-deception. In *Daniel Deronda*, however, even Grandcourt's and Deronda's mother's points of view must be understood in their own terms, and though the narrator may view them very much in a critical light that judgement has no absolute authority: even the narrator cannot transcend point of view.<sup>21</sup>

Eliot transforms Austen's fictional world by incorporating into it history and psychology: that is, how both the human world and the self have been determined by particular forces and sets of circumstances. What Eliot can be interpreted as doing in *Daniel Deronda* is attempting to take Austen's literary achievement forward by combining it with her own formidable intellectual armoury in these spheres. Although Austen is brilliant on the psychology of perception, she has little interest in psychology as the exploration of why people have the particular character and personalities that they have, other than to suggest that upbringing and education are essential to the development of a disciplined character and a healthy moral outlook. She does not, however, deal with how her central characters' psychology has been determined by earlier experiences, such as defining moments in childhood, or by the social and cultural situation into which they are born. The fact that Elizabeth and Jane Bennet have spent much time with their uncle and aunt, the Gardiners, allows Austen to avoid having to account for why Elizabeth Bennet is the morally upright person she is despite having a silly mother, a witty but irresponsible father and some almost anarchic sisters. Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, in contrast, presents Gwendolen's character as psychologically and socially determined. She is a stepchild who has been spoiled by her mother who did not remarry for love but for prudential reasons; neither her real father nor her stepfather, the latter described as 'unlovable' (*DD*, 17), has left much of an impression on her mind; she has lived a rootless existence; as a child she performed impulsive acts of egotism, such as refusing to get out of bed to fetch her mother's medicine when she was ill and strangling her sister's canary when it interrupts her singing; the limited culture of her class and its low artistic standards prevent her exploiting such assets as her musical talent.

With regard to history, Eliot's revision of Austen is apparent if one compares *Daniel Deronda* with an aspect of *Mansfield Park* that has been much discussed

in recent criticism of the novel. Following on Edward Said's essay 'Jane Austen and Empire', first published in 1989 and reprinted in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, critics have been much preoccupied with *Mansfield Park's* relation to imperialism, which centres on the role of Antigua in the novel and the implications of Fanny Price's question to Sir Thomas Bertram about slavery. This has led to much historical research into the West Indian sugar trade and its reliance on slavery and biographical research into Austen's and her family's connections with them.<sup>22</sup> Some post-colonialist criticism has read the novel as in effect allegorizing contemporary political debates on these subjects.<sup>23</sup> Previous criticism had virtually ignored this dimension of the novel: Claudia L. Johnson remarks that 'until very recently, the subject of slavery as it bears upon Austen's novels, has received little critical attention, probably due to the "time-honoured premise" that Austen would have been unconcerned with such subjects.'<sup>24</sup> Sir Thomas Bertram's residence in Antigua would thus have been seen as merely a plot device to remove him from England so that the events regarded as central to the novel could take place without his authority. Edward Said has described Austen's previous critics as 'negligent'.<sup>25</sup>

Eliot would almost certainly have taken the view that the references to Antigua and slavery in *Mansfield Park* were not considered important by Austen as Eliot would not have seen her as a novelist concerned with politics or ideas,<sup>26</sup> but unlike Austen's 'negligent' critics I believe she regarded these references as significant: they would have been signs of a missing dimension in Austen's fiction if seen from Eliot's realist perspective. In the light of modern post-colonial and feminist criticism this view of Austen is of course highly disputable. In *Daniel Deronda*, however, what Eliot does, I would suggest, is to take what she would have seen as insignificant details in Austen and transform their significance. As in *Mansfield Park* the wealth of Gwendolen's family is derived from the West Indies: '[Gwendolen] had no notion how her maternal grandfather got the fortune inherited by his two daughters; but he had been a West Indian' (*DD*, 17). In contrast to *Mansfield Park*, the colonial aspect of *Daniel Deronda* and its relation to the family's wealth is thus made explicit. Said states that 'as Austen certainly knew', the sugar trade in the West Indies and slave labour were 'the results of evident historical processes'.<sup>27</sup> Eliot would have taken the view that what Austen's fiction lacks from a realist viewpoint is any emphasis on 'evident historical processes', and it is this that she incorporates into her novel as it is intrinsic to her form of realism. The money that supports Gwendolen's family and their upper-middle-class way of life is derived from the empire. Mrs Davilow later confirms that her father, like Sir Thomas Bertram, had been a plantation owner in the West Indies: 'Mrs. Davilow observed that her father had an estate in Barbadoes' (*DD*, 279). It is significant that she says this in the context of a conversation related to a rebellion in Jamaica: Grandcourt takes the imperialist view that 'the Jamaican negro was a beastly sort of baptist Caliban' while Deronda speaks up for Caliban: 'Deronda said

he had always felt a little with Caliban, who naturally had his own point of view and could sing a good song.' Grandcourt is associated with colonialism later when the narrator points out that if he 'had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries' (*DD*, 507). These seem fairly obvious allusions to the scandal of the Governor Eyre affair, which resulted from the brutal crushing of a rebellion that took place in Jamaica in 1865. Gwendolen and her family are like Austen characters: they are quite uninterested in and ignorant of the source of their wealth, nor do they know anything about how that wealth is maintained through investments, thus their severe shock when Mr Lassman loses their fortune through ill-advised speculation. Thus what in Austen – as Eliot would have read her – appears to be merely a detail to which little or no significance is attached is developed in *Daniel Deronda* to reveal a relation between the life-style of Gwendolen and her family and historical forces such as colonialism.

Said in his essay on *Mansfield Park* sketches the historical background to British involvement in the Caribbean and the origins of imperialism as a powerful ideology that was to become a major force towards the latter part of the nineteenth century. More traditional critics, however, remain reluctant to accept post-colonial and political readings of Austen,<sup>28</sup> but while there may be debate about the role of colonialism in a novel such as *Mansfield Park*, there is no doubt that Eliot was knowledgeable about colonialism and that she fully intended to make it a significant element in *Daniel Deronda*. Indeed as Nancy Henry has argued in a recent study, *Daniel Deronda* represents a shift in Eliot's views regarding empire: in her earlier writings she was neutral in her attitude to the subject, but by the time of *Daniel Deronda* and her final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, she is increasingly aware that imperialism is taking on the status of an ideology, and this incipient ideology – driven by hegemonic Enlightenment ideas and capitalism as a globalizing economic force and thus contrary to a cultural relativism based on separateness with communication – is subject to critique in these final works.<sup>29</sup>

### *Daniel Deronda* and Dickens

Eliot's fiction and her approach to the novel were much less influenced by Dickens than by Scott and Austen. Indeed because of her criticism of him in her essay 'The Natural History of German Life' there is a tendency among critics to see her fiction as fundamentally different from his: 'Eliot's scientific and philosophical intellectualism, allied with her emphatically realist fictional style, made her a different kind of novelist than Dickens.'<sup>30</sup> Aspects of her novels that are less admired, such as the complex legal plot of *Felix Holt* or the entangled genealogical connections that link Ladislav with Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*,



are sometimes described as 'Dickensian' with the implication that they are out of place in an Eliot novel. Interestingly, F. R. Leavis in his discussion of *Daniel Deronda* in *The Great Tradition* sees the Meyricks and the Cohens as 'elements in George Eliot that seem to come from Dickens rather than from life'<sup>31</sup> and assumes without argument that influence from Dickens is *ipso facto* identifiable with artistic weakness. Yet it should be remembered that Eliot calls Dickens a 'great novelist' in 'The Natural History of German Life' even if she goes on to criticize him for a failure to represent adequately 'psychological character' and for a sentimentality at odds with realism.<sup>32</sup> She would have been well aware that no novelist could capture within one work the diversity of life as powerfully as Dickens, and *Daniel Deronda* is almost Dickens-like in its scope and social reach. Furthermore, it is Eliot's most socially critical novel by a long way and, of course, Dickens was the exemplar of the novelist as social critic. These would have been good reasons for interacting with his fiction. Dickens also has strong connections with romance since he continues and develops the Gothic tradition of the novel as well as being the major influence on the 'sensation novel', most associated with Wilkie Collins. Not to acknowledge and engage with Dickens, as well as with Scott and Austen, in a work that attempts to encompass the novel as a genre would therefore be unthinkable.

As I pointed out above, Eliot refers directly to Scott and alludes clearly to Austen, but there is nothing as explicit with regard to Dickens. However, I shall argue that there is very strong evidence that *Daniel Deronda* makes considerable use of *Little Dorrit*, a novel almost unequalled in its scope and more scathingly critical of Victorian society than any of Dickens's other works, in ways that can be compared with the interaction with the Scott and Austen novels already discussed. Eliot had certainly read it and comments on it specifically in 'The Natural History of German Life'. It has been suggested that there are parallels between *Little Dorrit* and *Middlemarch* though without claiming conscious influence on Eliot's part,<sup>33</sup> but in *Daniel Deronda* I believe Eliot intentionally draws on *Little Dorrit* for revisionist purposes.

Both novels begin in a degraded European setting in which different nationalities and races are brought together by the power of money: the trading port of Marseilles and the gambling casinos of Leubronn. At the beginning of the first chapter of *Little Dorrit* there are 'Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, English' and numerous others 'come to trade', and in Leubronn those involved in 'the passion of gambling' are 'varieties of European type: Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian' (*DD*, 4). The people in Marseilles guiltily try to avoid the 'stare' and 'glare' whose source is a 'blazing sun upon a fierce August day', which leads to their 'taking refuge in any hiding place from a sea too intensely blue to be looked at, and a sky of purple, set with one great flaming jewel of fire'. Everything except lizards is 'oppressed by the glare' and strives to 'keep out the stare'. Leubronn is not represented in such a surrealist style, but Gwendolen

Harleth at the gambling table is also oppressed by the implicitly judgemental 'gaze' of Deronda: 'The daring sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior, that he was of a different quality from the human dross around her ... and was examining her as a specimen of a lower order, roused a tingling resentment ... Deronda's gaze seemed to have acted as an evil eye' (*DD*, 5–6). Echoes of Dickens's *Marseilles* are also apparent in Deronda's experience of Genoa, where he goes to meet his mother, though Genoa is generally represented much more positively. In *Marseilles* are 'staring roads, deep in dust' as it 'lay broiling in the sun one day' with a 'prison taint ... on everything there',<sup>34</sup> and in Genoa 'the noons were getting hotter, the converging outer roads getting deeper with white dust', and Deronda 'found himself contemplating all activity with the aloofness of a prisoner awaiting ransom' (*DD*, 534). Eliot may even imitate Dickens's playful and animistic style: 'the oleanders in the tubs along the wayside gardens looking more and more like fatigued holidaymakers ... while the encircling heights, crowded with forts, skirted with fine dwellings and gardens, seemed also to come forth and gaze in fullness of beauty after their long siesta' (*DD*, 533). Both works move between England and Europe and money-making and gambling, whether by financial speculation or at the roulette table, are represented as potentially corrupting forces. However, the major connections between the novels are in terms of character and plot.

The main male character in *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam, is an introspective man, lacking in self-confidence, partly because of his unhappy childhood and his suspicion that there is something hidden and shameful in his family's past that his parents have not disclosed to him. He lacks the will to put pressure on Mrs Clennam – the woman he thinks is his mother but who turns out not to be – to provide answers. Deronda has similarities to Clennam in some respects, being also introspective, partly because his fear that there may be something shameful about his origins has accentuated his self-consciousness; he does not know who his mother is and cannot bring himself to question Sir Hugo Mallinger, who he thinks is his father but who turns out not to be. Clennam's romantic feelings are divided between two women: Pet Meagles, who is beautiful and eligible, and Amy Dorrit, who is socially unacceptable, having been born in the Marshalsea debtors' prison. Deronda also has divided feelings for two women, the beautiful Gwendolen Harleth, whom Sir Hugo tries to persuade Deronda to woo, and Mirah Lapidoth, socially unacceptable since she is poor and Jewish. Clennam lacks the will to court Pet Meagles and allows Henry Gowan, who regards himself as upper class even if he lacks the wealth necessary to support that status, to win her. Deronda fails to take further Sir Hugo's encouragement that he should try to win Gwendolen for himself: he does not make any effort to prevent an upper class gentleman, Henleigh Grandcourt, marrying her. Grandcourt and Gowan have much in common. The names Henry Gowan and Henleigh Grandcourt are similar, having the same initials and the same number of syllables. Both also become sadistic

husbands who make the lives of their wives a misery and treat their dogs in the way they treat women: '[Gowan] took no notice of a fine Newfoundland dog, who watched him attentively'<sup>35</sup>; "I fear that Fetch was jealous, and wounded that her master [Grandcourt] gave her no word or look" (*DD*, 104). Clennam finally marries Amy Dorrit after undergoing the traumatic experience of being confined to the Marshalsea, thus finding himself intrinsically connected with her. Deronda similarly marries Mirah after discovering his Jewish heritage and is thus fundamentally connected with her.

As the Clennam and Deronda narratives are linked, so are those of Amy Dorrit and Mirah Lapidoth. They are at the moral centre of their respective novels. Both come from problematic families but nevertheless feel an overwhelming commitment to family duty and responsibility. Despite the shortcomings of their fathers, particularly severe in Mirah's case, they refuse to reject them at a personal level though opposed to virtually everything their fathers represent. They adhere to ideals that call into question the prevailing ideologies of their respective societies that are founded on individualism and materialism. At the level of plot there are several similarities between them. Amy loves Clennam but has no expectation that it is reciprocated; likewise Mirah is afraid her love for Deronda is unrequited. Both fear that the men they love may love someone else, Pet Meagles in Amy's case and Gwendolen Harleth in Mirah's. Both are loved by other men whom they do not love, which proves an embarrassment, Amy by the pathetic John Chivery, Mirah by the flamboyant artist, Hans Meyrick. Meyrick echoes Chivery by transcending disappointment and egotism and telling Deronda that Mirah loves him, in the same way as Chivery tells Clennam he is loved by Amy. Thus the rejected lovers precipitate both marriages. A minor similarity between the novels is that in *Little Dorrit* Amy, much to the consternation of her newly enriched family, preserves her prison dress because her prison identity is central to her sense of self. Likewise Mordecai, taken from his previous form of life to a new comfortable mode of existence with Mirah, with new clothes bought for him by Deronda, preserves his former clothes: 'I must keep my old garments by me for a remembrance' (*DD*, 496).

Gwendolen also parallels Pet Meagles in various respects: both are beautiful, attractive to two pairs of men. Pet is described as 'a spoiled child'<sup>36</sup> and the title of Book I of *Daniel Deronda* is 'The Spoiled Child'. However, Pet is rather passive and one dimensional and suffers stoically, whereas Gwendolen is neurotic, a supreme egotist, potentially murderous. Gwendolen might be seen as combining Pet with one of Dickens's most powerful psychological portraits in *Little Dorrit*, the proto-Dostoevskian Miss Wade who is psychologically damaged by her upbringing and like Gwendolen is capable of violence. Gwendolen's hatred for Grandcourt echoes Miss Wade's for Gowan: "I hate him," she returned. "Worse than his wife, because I was once dupe enough, and false enough to myself, almost to love him"<sup>37</sup>. Another significant link is that Deronda's mother's confession that she concealed his parentage from

him echoes Clennam's supposed mother eventually confessing that she did the same to Clennam. Deronda's mother also has parallels with Mrs Clennam in that both believe their actions were right and reject guilt or regret even though circumstances compel them to confess.

A more general connection between both novels is that their plots are governed by a series of coincidences and improbabilities, elements that are characteristic of the romance rather than the realist tradition of fiction. These are recurrent features of Dickens's plots, though perhaps more prevalent in *Little Dorrit* than in most of his other novels. Although one can find coincidence and improbability in Eliot's earlier fiction – most obviously in *Silas Marner*, perhaps a special case as its narrative openly draws on myth and fairy tale – in *Daniel Deronda* it might be argued that they almost reach Dickensian proportions. Of course, in any novel made up of multiple plots which are eventually connected and intertwined, coincidence and improbability are virtually inevitable in the unfolding of the narrative. With Dickens this does not raise any formal problems as his novels transcend ordinary notions of realism, and as a Christian writer in some sense a plot driven by coincidence and improbability might suggest the existence of a metaphysical order that is part of the nature of things though this is only implicit and not spelled out. But in Eliot's novels, since she is commonly identified with a realist aesthetic and with religious scepticism, coincidence and improbability have been perceived by critics as a formal problem in her work because they are associated with an imposed patterning related to providence which, as Carol Christ puts it, is 'so strangely inconsistent with Eliot's commitment to realism', and in allowing 'that providence to rescue her more favored characters [Eliot] betrays a reluctance not only to abandon the idea of a benevolent providence but to confront the most tragic consequences of her own vision'.<sup>38</sup>

However, the fact that Eliot incorporated significant elements of *Little Dorrit* into *Daniel Deronda*, including a plot in which coincidence and improbability play a significant part, suggests that she did not see Dickens's fiction as fundamentally opposed to her own: a revisionist approach to Dickensian coincidence and improbability was possible. Perhaps the main reason why she creates something like Dickens's panoramic plot is because of its power to penetrate virtually every aspect of society and because like him she believes ultimately in human connectedness though her views are purely humanistic. For Eliot coincidence and improbability are not intrinsically incompatible with realism and need not entail – *pace* Carol Christ – benevolent providence: they happen all the time because they are a statistical certainty. It is significant that Eliot by implication defends the presence of the improbable in *Daniel Deronda* on statistical grounds by quoting a saying of Agathon's referred to in Aristotle's *Poetics* in the epigraph to Chapter 41: 'It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen.'

If the improbable is not to undermine the credibility of realist fiction, however, it is essential it be handled with the kind of literary tact that Dickens

(and the romance tradition) can ignore because his mode of discourse is heightened, stylized and performative. Although a one-page summary of *Daniel Deronda* may make coincidence and improbability appear excessive by normal realist criteria, Eliot's reference to Agathon's saying suggests that her intention at least is to have them absorbed into the novel's realism: in other words, it is chance that Deronda should encounter Jews like Mirah and Mordecai and then turn out to have Jewish origins. Deronda in effect gambles that Mordecai may be right about his being a Jew, but the chance of his being a Jew is surely reasonable.<sup>39</sup> Since he does not know his origins his turning out to be a Jew is hardly a coincidence on a Dickensian scale, such as Estella in *Great Expectations* turning out to be the daughter of Pip's benefactor, Magwitch.

Perhaps the major criticism of Eliot's use of coincidence and improbability in *Daniel Deronda* is Carol Christ's point that it makes things turn out better than they might have, so that a benevolent providence – again associated with romance – might seem to be at work, with Deronda happy to accept his Jewish heritage and consequently being able to marry Mirah and commit himself fully to Mordecai's mission and Grandcourt's accidental death, though assisted by Gwendolen's inaction, freeing her from her nightmarish marriage. But the problem with this argument is that it implies that the author is false to 'reality' when there is no 'reality' separate from that created in the novel against which one can make such a judgement. Reality is, in effect, identified with the probable, but any conception of reality that excludes the improbable is surely flawed, as Eliot's epigraph implies. Since, as she states in 'Notes on Form in Art', any narrative will inevitably be 'a set of relations selected & combined in accordance with a sequence of mental states in the constructor', everything in a novel is under the control of the author: to have Deronda discover he is not a Jew would be as much an authorial choice as for him to be a Jew. To claim that his turning out to be a Jew and Gwendolen being freed from Grandcourt by his death are improbable and therefore lack credibility does not help because, as Eliot points out, improbable things happen. Arguably, narratives that eliminate improbabilities totally are not driven by realism – indeed strictly speaking the complete absence of the improbable and coincidence would undermine realism – but by a fear that coincidence implies authorial manipulation or a belief in providence and an immanent order in the world.

For Eliot, however, coincidence and the improbable are an integral part of the structure of *Daniel Deronda*, being associated with the role of chance in life, the gambling motif and Darwinian allusions in the text. One could also point out that to see Grandcourt's death as benevolently providential for Gwendolen ignores the fact that what she fears in effect comes about: she achieves freedom from Grandcourt by killing him, even if only passively. Deronda's interpretation of Gwendolen's account, excusing her of any culpability, is surely to be seen as somewhat convenient, a point I shall return to in the final chapter. What interests Eliot is how Gwendolen will cope with life after the

death of Grandcourt and Deronda leaving her, and the narrative is constructed in accordance with that. It could still be argued that Eliot was too ambitious in attempting to reconcile a revisionist version of Dickensian plot with its use of coincidence with her own form of realism in order to achieve something of the imaginative range and scope of Dickens's panoramic novels. However, her critics have perhaps tended to operate both with an untheorized concept of plausibility – how things tend to happen in the 'real' world – and with an objection to coincidence and the improbable on ideological grounds and have not recognized the deliberate interplay Eliot creates between *Daniel Deronda* and Dickensian fictional discourse.

As well as trying to adapt Dickensian plot and narrative structure in order to reconcile them with her form of realism, Eliot can be seen as revising Dickens at the level of characterization in *Daniel Deronda* in that she historicizes and psychologizes the character types she has drawn from him. For example, in *Little Dorrit* Amy Dorrit's selfless love is a given, part of her saintly nature: there is no indication where it has come from. Although Mirah is often seen as one of Eliot's most idealized characters, Eliot's intention is surely to go beyond Dickensian idealization. Mirah is historicized in that she is a product of her Jewish upbringing and the religious and moral values instilled into her by her mother and Jewish culture generally. In terms of psychology an interesting contrast can be made between Amy's and Mirah's reactions when they find out that there is another woman in the lives of the men they love. Amy's saintly disposition does not give way to jealousy. Mirah in contrast is consumed by jealousy, and the strength of her feelings suggests that Eliot's intention is to show that Mirah and Gwendolen exist on the same human level, whereas in *Little Dorrit* Amy and Miss Wade seem different in kind as characters. Mirah's and Mordecai's contrasting readings of the story of the Jewish maiden and the Gentile king in Chapter 61 also indicate that Eliot aims not only to undermine idealization of Mirah but also to introduce a more critical perspective on Mordecai and his idealism. His view of Mirah's reading of the story – that she has 'read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as indwelling demons' and that she judges 'by the plays, and not by thy own heart, which is like our mother's' (*DD*, 629) – is clearly a projection of his ideals about women onto Mirah and thus, the narrator suggests, a misinterpretation of her at this point in the novel.

## Conclusion

If my argument that *Daniel Deronda* is a novel that sets out to subsume and interact dialectically with the fiction of Eliot's major predecessors is persuasive, then this creates a different context for interpretation and critical judgement.

Although it might appear that Eliot is breaking away from the realism with which she is most associated and moving towards the romance tradition, I believe this would be a misinterpretation of the relation between *Daniel Deronda* and that tradition. Rather the romance aspects arise from Eliot's attempt to bring her own form of realism – which is informed by modern thinking in such areas as psychology, history, sociology, science and is therefore not static but must continually develop – to bear on the work of writers whose realism is both limited in certain respects and in some of its aspects compromised by being combined with romance. Eliot does not reject romance and clearly recognizes its literary power and imaginative scope. Realism will have greater force if it can harness some of that literary power and imaginative scope so that they can be incorporated and contained within realism as she understood it. The degree of artistic success achieved by *Daniel Deronda* has always been a controversial issue, but arguably many of the negative judgements could be said to derive from the application of inappropriate aesthetic criteria or a failure to take account of the novel's basic conception as well as the assumption that Eliot's fiction is rooted in the Victorian tradition and has little or no connection with literary modernism. Whether her attempt to create a synthesizing novel, realist in basis but encompassing the fiction of major predecessors who wrote in various romance modes, succeeds in artistic terms will be a matter of critical judgement. What is undeniable is that *Daniel Deronda* is one of the most ambitious novels written in the nineteenth century.

## 8

# Circumcision, Realism and Irony in *Daniel Deronda*

## I

*Daniel Deronda* has been attacked by critics who take the view that Eliot in her final novel compromised the realism with which she was generally associated by allowing symbolism, idealism and flirtations with the romance mode to dominate in the Jewish part of the novel. This led to the claim that it was structurally incoherent, a claim I have questioned in Chapters 6 and 7. A different critique of the novel's coherence emerged from contemporary critical theory. In an innovative and challenging deconstructive reading of the novel, it was claimed that Eliot's realism was founded on an irresolvable contradiction, and it was implied that this was symptomatic of virtually all forms of literary realism. The ultimate source of this deconstructive critique was a footnote to an essay first published in 1975 in which Steven Marcus remarked that a graduate student of his, Lennard Davis, had noticed something interesting about *Daniel Deronda*:

Mr Davis has discovered a detail – or a missing detail – in *Daniel Deronda* that throws the whole central plot of the novel out of kilter. Deronda's identity is a mystery to himself and has always been. It is only when he is a grown man, having been to Eton and Cambridge, that he discovers that he is a Jew. What this has to mean – given the conventions of medical practice at the time – is that he never looked down. In order for the plot of *Daniel Deronda* to work, Deronda's circumcised penis must be invisible, or non-existent – which is one more demonstration in detail of why the plot does not in fact work.<sup>1</sup>

This 'detail' became the central element in a deconstructive reading of the novel by Cynthia Chase.

Chase argues that the novel demands not only a spiritual conversion on the part of Deronda but also a physical transformation of the type found in fairy tales. It is not enough for Deronda to 'take up the spiritual and cultural tradition of Judaism', since the narrator, she claims, makes it clear that to be a Jew is to be born a Jew. But *Daniel Deronda* employs a discourse that cannot accommodate such a transformation. Chase writes,

Insistence on the hero's specifically Jewish identity not only puts in question the authority of the discourse but effectively disrupts its coherence. The text's insistent reference leads relentlessly to the referent – to *la chose*, in fact: the



hero's phallus, which must have been circumcized, given what we are told of his history. In the period in which *Deronda's* story takes place, male babies were not routinely circumcized. Circumcision was a ritual procedure practiced by Jews, so that evidence of circumcision amounted to evidence of Jewish origin. For *Deronda* not to have known he was Jewish until his mother told him means, in these terms, 'that he never looked down', an idea that exceeds, as much as does magical metamorphosis, the generous limits of realism. *Deronda* must have known, but he did not: otherwise, of course, there could be no story. The plot can function only if *la chose*, *Deronda's* circumcized penis, is disregarded; yet the novel's realism and referentiality function precisely to draw attention to it.<sup>2</sup>

Chase goes on to use this 'detail' and her interpretation of it to make a number of deconstructionist points concerning rhetoric and signification in the novel. The implicit claim that Eliot either did not realize that circumcision was problematic for its realist plot or that she merely disregarded it points to an assumption that Eliot's approach to the novel lacks the literary self-consciousness that is characteristic of modernist and postmodernist fiction and consigns it squarely within conventional Victorian realism.

In the passage I have quoted from Chase she uses conventional historical discourse: 'In the period in which *Deronda's* story takes place, male babies were not routinely circumcized.' She is seeking to validate her interpretation by reference to history, and in doing so she introduces into her interpretation empirical considerations, which require to be supported by evidence. Since '*Deronda's* circumcized penis', Chase claims, 'is disregarded', then the question of the author's intentionality is also introduced as who else could be doing this disregarding but the author, even though elsewhere Chase denies that intention is important for her interpretation: her reading is not 'concerned merely with meanings that could plausibly be ascribed to the intentions of the narrator'.<sup>3</sup> (Chase here appears to be identifying the narrator with the author.) However, for circumcision to be 'disregarded' the author must have known about circumcision as a Jewish practice and chosen (or chosen for her narrator) consciously or unconsciously to ignore it.

Chase's use of historical discourse and her implicit assumption about the author's intention mean that it is legitimate to bring the historical and the intentional into play in considering her reading, either to support it or to call it into question. Is she right to assume that only Jews would have been circumcised in nineteenth-century England or that Eliot knew this but was compelled to disregard this knowledge for the purpose of making her plot work? There are, however, several other points connected with the question of intention that need to be considered before further discussion of the historical aspect of this question.

It could be argued that the fact that the matter of circumcision has been noticed only fairly recently and apparently did not trouble readers for nearly a century<sup>4</sup> indicates that this is no more an internal contradiction in the novel than the inconsistent time schemes are an internal contradiction in

*Othello*. Yet Eliot's commitment to realism and the great pains she took in her work to create an authentic and accurate representation of the world, to the smallest 'detail', one feels tempted to say, suggest that it would have been unlikely that she would have thought nothing of infringing realism by disregarding a documentary fact about Jews to serve her literary purposes. Chase is right to claim that, if Eliot departed from realism in this instance, this is a clear disruption of the coherence of the novel's realist discourse. A simplistic defence of Eliot might be that she could have merely forgotten that Jews were circumcised. Given her deep interest in and knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture, this seems extremely improbable. It might also be claimed that, bearing in mind Victorian sensitivity regarding open discussion of such matters, Deronda need not know that he is circumcised, but this can hardly be reconciled with the interest he develops in and the study he makes of Judaism. A final possibility that needs to be considered is that we cannot know for certain that he was circumcised, but this would seem to be contradicted by the fact that he was 'more than two years old' (*DD*, 544) when his mother chose to separate him from Jewish life and gave him to Sir Hugo, and circumcision as a Jewish rite takes place eight days after birth. Chase's position can only be seriously challenged, I believe, by the view that Eliot intended circumcision to be realistically present in the novel even though it is not mentioned and indeed cannot be mentioned in so many words. I shall argue that it is possible not only to accommodate Deronda's circumcision in an interpretation of the novel that does not see realism as being compromised but also to use this 'detail' to overcome some of the traditional objections that have been made in regard to the 'Deronda plot'.

Before supporting this position, one should, however, consider an alternative both to my view and to that of Chase. In an essay entitled 'Is Daniel Deronda Circumcised?',<sup>5</sup> John Sutherland takes a radically mimetic and anti-formalist view of the issue. He defines his area of interest as 'that forbidden territory, the *hors texte* – or, more precisely, that implied and ambiguous world which lies on the other side of the words on the page'. In his discussion of novels he in effect abolishes any distinction between the world of the novel and the real world. He argues that one can legitimately infer that Deronda's mother took a decision not to have her son circumcised from the remark she makes to him when recounting her reasons for having him adopted by Sir Hugo: 'I saved you from it' (*DD*, 540). On the surface this means she saved him from being brought up in the Jewish faith, but Sutherland extends the meaning to include circumcision. In normal practice it is the Jewish father who arranges circumcision eight days after the birth, but Sutherland overcomes this problem by asserting that her husband 'Ephraim is a poor creature, and wholly subject to his wife' and would therefore 'not stand in her way'.

But if one looks closely at Deronda's mother's account of her decision to have her son brought up as a non-Jew in Chapter 51, Sutherland's argument

is surely lacking in credibility. The key passage is the following in which she states to Deronda,

We must part again soon, and you owe me no duties. I did not wish you to be born. I parted with you willingly. When your father died, I resolved that I would have no more ties, but such as I could free myself from. I was the Alcharisi you have heard of: the name had magic wherever it was carried. Men courted me. Sir Hugo Mallinger was one who wished to marry me. He was madly in love with me. One day I asked him, 'Is there a man capable of doing something for love of me, and expecting nothing in return?' He said, 'What is it you want done?' I said, 'Take my boy and bring him up as an Englishman, and let him never know anything about his parents'. (*DD*, 543)

It is clear from this passage that it is only after her husband dies that it occurs to her to give Deronda away and have him brought up as a non-Jew. All that she says about her son before that point is that she did not wish him born. There is no indication that she had any thought of giving her son away until her husband died, by which time Deronda is two years old. If she had no plan initially to separate Deronda from Jewishness and Judaism and only decided to do so when the death of her husband gave her that opportunity, what would have been the point of forcing her husband not to have him circumcised when he was going eventually to know that he was the son of a Jewish mother and father?

Clearly the key event in Deronda being given to Sir Hugo was the death of Deronda's father. It was this that precipitated the plan to have Deronda brought up as a non-Jew in ignorance of his origins. But if Deronda's father had lived Deronda would surely have stayed with his parents or at least with his father and his Jewishness would have been apparent whether circumcised or not. Sutherland makes much of the point that Deronda's father 'is a poor creature, and wholly subject to his wife' and thus would not have resisted the non-circumcision of his son. But Deronda's non-circumcision would make sense only in the context of a plan to separate Deronda from Jewishness right from the start as part of her rebellion against her heritage. But she had no such plan when Deronda was born. Though her husband may have been compliant there is no suggestion in the text that he would have been compliant to the extent of agreeing to give the two-year-old Deronda away to Sir Hugo and having him brought up in ignorance of his parentage.

But perhaps the major weakness of Sutherland's argument is a more formal one: is it legitimate to treat the novel, even the 'realist novel', as if it were real life so that events beyond those actually recounted are available for the reader to speculate about? It seems to me to be highly unlikely that Eliot was the kind of writer who would have thought of the novel as working in such terms. Though her fiction is rightly thought of as realist in conception, her work, especially from *Silas Marner* on, is highly formal in its nature. Devices such as parallelism, analogy, symbolism, patterns of imagery, keywords all emphasize

the fact that her novels are literary structures and powerfully suggest that she would not have wanted her readers to go far beyond so carefully designed a text in the way that Sutherland does.

## II

To return to my claim that circumcision is a presence in the text and that Eliot intended it to be, the first point to make in supporting this position is that direct reference is not necessary for some element to be seen as present in a literary text. But the claim that circumcision is included in the realism of *Daniel Deronda* is based on literary logic and not interpretive speculation. In terms of realism circumcision is logically entailed by the fact that Deronda is born into a Jewish family and is not handed over to Sir Hugo until he is two years old. There is no need for it to be mentioned directly, since it is indirectly signified by Deronda's Jewish origins. A weakness of Chase's argument that circumcision is disregarded and deconstructs the novel's claim to realism is that her interpretation itself disregards the impossibility of circumcision being referred to openly in a Victorian novel. Readers of novels are well aware that they, as theorist of narrative Seymour Chatman puts it, 'must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned'.<sup>6</sup> If a male character has been born into a Jewish family, therefore, the assumption will be that he has been circumcised, unless it is made clear that he is not. Although Jewish infants with a family history of bleeding can apparently be exempted, such a consideration would need to be directly mentioned before it could play a signifying role in the text. One must therefore assume the norm unless the text provides an indication to the contrary.

Circumcision can be seen as having the same status in this context as sexual organs, and of course circumcision must allude to these. As Chase herself remarks, both sexual organs and circumcision would be likely to create embarrassment among Victorian readers. But, though no embarrassing reference may be made to sexual organs in Victorian novels, even a Victorian reader would assume that characters, being human, possessed them and would know, without having to be told by the author, that these unmentionables performed a signifying function – in defining the characters' sexual identity, in determining the nature of relationships between them, in accounting for any children they might have. I would suggest that circumcision signifies in a similar way in *Daniel Deronda*.

It might be objected by those who see Eliot as a typical narrow-minded Victorian that she would never have contemplated even an indirect allusion to circumcision, a view of Eliot that Cross's biography promoted and one that is surely outmoded. Chase's interest, however, is in the novel's literary

discourse: if Deronda is of Jewish origin and was given to Sir Hugo when he was two years old then his ignorance of his Jewish birth, attested by his circumcision, is irreconcilable with the novel's plot, and this contradiction is symptomatic of a fundamental problem with the nineteenth-century novel's realist aesthetic. But she ignores the obvious point that it is Eliot as author who chooses to have Deronda handed over at the age of two. If circumcision is irreconcilable with the realism of the plot, as both Marcus and Chase claim, then Eliot could easily have arranged matters so that Deronda was handed over to Sir Hugo almost immediately after birth or at the very least have been vague as to when he was handed over. The fact that she provides information which makes the reader – that is, any reader who thinks of the matter – assume, in accordance with the norms of signification, that Deronda would have been circumcised does not suggest that circumcision is disregarded; on the contrary, it suggests that she intends it to be present in the novel as a signifier though she cannot mention it explicitly.

But the most serious objection to my position is the claim by Chase that in the period in which the novel is set circumcision is an unmistakable sign of Jewishness and that Deronda must know he is a Jew even though the plot is based on his lacking such knowledge. To return therefore to the historical question, Chase's assumption that circumcision was not 'routinely' practised in Victorian England. But, though it may not have been 'routine', is there evidence to suggest that it was fairly common for non-Jews to be circumcised? If there is, Chase's interpretation of the novel is clearly vulnerable and my argument is strengthened, since circumcision need not be an unambiguous sign of Jewishness.

It is clear from nineteenth-century medical books that circumcision was a standard treatment for the common condition in infants of congenital phimosis, the contraction of the preputial orifice. I shall quote some representative comments:

In all common cases of natural phimosis, the best modern operators in this metropolis, and many excellent surgeons abroad, prefer circumcision.<sup>7</sup>

In all cases [of phimosis] I prefer circumcision as the simplest and speediest operation, and as leaving the most satisfactory result.<sup>8</sup>

Another common condition is a prepuce much too long ... Such prepuces always call for circumcision.<sup>9</sup>

Eliot's own physician, Sir James Paget, something of an authority on this area of medicine, also believed that phimosis 'frequently requires operation in children, especially if the orifice of the prepuce be very narrow',<sup>10</sup> though Paget believed that surgery was too often resorted to in such cases. Paget was also a friend of Eliot and G. H. Lewes and a copy of the first edition of the book I have quoted from, published in 1875, with a dedication to Lewes, is to be found among their books in Dr Williams's Library.<sup>11</sup>

There is also some evidence that even in the nineteenth century circumcision was performed for hygienic or health reasons. P. C. Remondino in his admittedly bizarre *History of Circumcision* maintains that 'the physician class' in the United States, France and England choose circumcision as a hygienic precaution with every male child in their own families, and he goes on to say more generally, 'The practice is now much more prevalent than is supposed, as there are many Christian families where males are regularly circumcised soon after birth, who simply do so as a hygienic measure.'<sup>12</sup>

Several of the writers whom I have quoted mention that phimosis could encourage masturbation, which was almost universally condemned during this period, and clearly this would be an additional reason for circumcising infants. Paget did not claim it was injurious to health, though this was not the general view, but still condemned it: 'I wish that I could say something worse of so nasty a practice; an uncleanness, a filthiness, forbidden by GOD, an unmanliness despised by men.'<sup>13</sup> Alex Comfort, who made a study of attitudes to masturbation in the nineteenth century, states the circumcision was increasingly used to combat it: 'The eighteenth and early nineteenth century, believing masturbation to be a harmful as well as sinful practice, attempted to cure it, but from 1850 to 1879 surgical measures become increasingly popular.'<sup>14</sup>

A common theory of the origin of circumcision is that it was designed to diminish interest in sex and thus to remove a barrier to concentration on religion. Comfort noted that Renaissance medical writers had believed the foreskin contributed greatly to sexual pleasure, and Paget held a similar view. William Acton agreed with Paget but went on to imply that it would be a good thing if all infants were therefore circumcised: 'Admitting, as I do, that this distinguished physiologist is right in the abstract, I am still of the opinion that the prepuce in man (at least in civilized life) is the cause of much mischief, and that we could well spare that organ.'<sup>15</sup> It would therefore seem clear that, in the period in which the novel is set, circumcision would not have been identified solely with Jews since it would commonly have been performed in cases of phimosis, to combat masturbation, for hygienic reasons at least among those aware of health benefits or to diminish interest in sex generally.

How does this historical investigation of circumcision affect the interpretation of *Daniel Deronda*? A recurrent theme in Eliot's fiction is the tension between sign and meaning; all signs need to be interpreted, and even what may appear to be the most obvious sign can be misinterpreted: 'Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable', as *Middlemarch* puts it. This theme is also present in *Daniel Deronda*, particularly in connection with Deronda: 'Both Emperor and Rabbi were wrong in their trust of outward signs: poverty and poor clothes are no sign of inspiration, said Deronda to his inward objector, but they have gone with it in some remarkable cases' (*DD*, 437). Deronda, who is subject to 'oppressive scepticism' (*DD*, 534), is represented as being

aware that signs do not possess immanent meaning and that an individual's desires shape his or her reading of signs. Although circumcision could not be mentioned specifically, I would suggest that its main role is as an ambiguous sign for Deronda. Thinking of the matter from his point of view, he cannot know what his being circumcised signifies, though being of Jewish origin must be a possibility. In Chase's interpretation, in contrast – somewhat ironically since deconstruction normally emphasizes the polysemic possibilities of the signifier – circumcision functions as an unambiguous sign of Jewishness.

There is nothing in Deronda's life up until his chance encounter with Mirah to connect him with Jews, apart from circumcision. Since circumcision could be performed for other reasons, Deronda has no reason to believe it to be an unequivocal sign of Jewishness. Not that this possibility would have been welcome to someone of his upbringing, as he possesses some popular prejudices about Jews: 'Deronda could not escape (who can?) knowing ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations' (*DD*, 176). He worries about the consequences of tracing Mirah's brother, but there is also a suggestion of personal fear on his part for he must know that circumcision is a Jewish rite: 'In his anxiety about Mirah's relatives, he had lately been thinking of vulgar Jews with a sort of personal alarm' (*DD*, 309).

However, Deronda believes that the strongest probability is that Sir Hugo Mallinger is his father. It is the sudden realization that he could be Sir Hugo's illegitimate son which makes him aware of the ambiguous nature of signs when he is compelled to make 'a new mental survey of familiar facts' (*DD*, 205). Even if Sir Hugo is his father, circumcision could still be a sign of Jewishness if his unknown mother was a Jew. Or it could simply be a sign without significant meaning: that he suffered from phimosis as an infant or that his doctor believed in circumcision as a health safeguard. It could also have sexual significance. Deronda's first doubt about his identity occurs in the context of sexual excess and licence: his question to his tutor about why popes and cardinals had so many nephews. He then thinks it almost certain that he was the product of such excess. What therefore could his having been circumcised signify in such a context? Might his circumcision be a sign that it was feared that he might inherit the excessive sexual desires of one or both of his parents and that this step was taken to lessen this possibility. William Acton believed that children could inherit strong sexual passions from their parents: 'Early voluptuous ideas ... are ... traceable to the brain; and I believe, heritable, like many other qualities, from parents who have not held the animal passions in any sort of check.'<sup>16</sup> Circumcision, then, offers many possibilities for ambiguity of meaning in Deronda's situation, and several of his characteristics can be interpreted as understandable responses to this ambiguity: such as his apprehensiveness at the thought of 'vulgar' Jews and his dread at finding out the truth about his parentage. His anxiety about his identity is made psychologically credible since this sign could mean both so much and so little.

If circumcision is seen as part of the theme of the ambiguity of signs, this helps to dispose of a difficulty that has often been said to undermine the credibility of the plot: that Deronda should turn out to have been born into a Jewish family and so be able to fulfil the role that Mordecai has created for him is seen as too contrived and convenient to be reconcilable with the novel's realism. For Chase it is a 'magical metamorphosis' that 'exceeds the limits of realistic narrative'. Her view that normal causality is inverted in the novel seems attractive, though the novel itself alludes to causality being inverted in Hans Meyrick's letter to Deronda. The root of the problem, however, is in Deronda's attitude to Mordecai's claim that he is a Jew in terms of his racial origins. There is no difficulty in accounting for Mordecai's belief in it, since he possesses the visionary expectation that someone will come to carry on his work. Deronda must also have something of the physical appearance of a Jew. We are told he is dark, for example, but again the signs are ambiguous since his face is 'not more distinctively oriental than many a type seen among what we call the Latin races' (*DD*, 425). If there is no evidence whatever to support Mordecai's belief that Deronda is a Jew, it is difficult to understand, from a realist standpoint, why he should resolve to fulfil Mordecai's idealistic hopes if he can, since for Mordecai he must be a Jew by race to do so. That he should then turn out to be a Jew seems to be the product of the author's will and not a credible working out of events.

However, if Deronda is circumcised, he must be aware that he has something in common with Jews, and since he does not know for sure the truth about his parentage, it must of course be possible that he has Jewish origins. There is a suggestion that he is not totally surprised by Mordecai's claim that he is a Jew even if he thinks it unlikely. He does not dismiss it as absurd or bizarre: 'The claim hung, too, on a supposition which might be – nay, probably was – in discordance with the full fact: the supposition that he, Deronda, was of Jewish blood. Was there ever a more hypothetic appeal?' (*DD*, 436). To say only that Mordecai 'might be' or 'probably' was wrong is odd if there is nothing whatever to connect Deronda with Jews. And the only possible personal link he could have had with Jews before Mirah encouraged his interest in them is circumcision. But circumcision is not proof that he is a Jew, much as he would like to be one after encountering Mordecai, a man capable of providing him with the aim in life he has been seeking. Deronda is, however, well aware how easily desire influences interpretation and that signs can be misread. But if he is circumcised his willingness to comply with Mordecai's 'hypothetic' belief, at least provisionally, and his turning out actually to be a Jew are reasonable and probable and therefore easily reconcilable with realist narrative. Consequently, the plot can be defended both against the claims of those who believe it undermines the canons of conventional realism and against Chase's deconstructionist critique.

Where the plot of *Daniel Deronda* is different from Eliot's previous novels is that – like Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale*, which plays a part in the novel – she



departs from her usual practice when she conceals from the reader the essential element of the plot, that Deronda is of Jewish origin, until more than half way through. But one of Eliot's innovations in *Daniel Deronda* is to incorporate within her mode of realism some aspects of the 'sensation novel', which defers revealing information fundamental to the narrative but may also leave clues which an attentive reader could pick up. Though circumcision does not seem to have occurred to the novel's readers for around a hundred years – which suggests a limited perception of Eliot as a writer since it was apparently inconceivable that she could deal with such a subject – it can be argued that it is indirectly alluded to in the text, especially in Chapter 16 when the question of his origins strikes Deronda forcibly. Its implied presence makes Deronda's sense of estrangement more dramatically convincing, otherwise, as T. S. Eliot remarked of Hamlet, Deronda's emotional disturbance may seem 'in excess of the facts as they appear'.<sup>17</sup> Believing that it is highly likely that he is the illegitimate son of Sir Hugo yet also being circumcised credibly creates the fear that he might be different in some fundamental way from Sir Hugo and his class. Circumcision becomes a sign of difference, and though he cannot be sure of its meaning, it fills him with dread:

If his father had been wicked – Daniel inwardly used strong words, for he was feeling the injury done him as a maimed boy feels the crushed limb which for others is merely reckoned in an average of accidents – if his father had done any wrong, he wished it might never be spoken of to him: it was already a cutting thought that such knowledge might be in other minds. (*DD*, 144)

This imagery of being maimed and wounded is used several times, the phrase 'cutting thought' being particularly resonant. Other examples are as follows: 'he would never bring himself near even a silent admission of the sore that had opened in him' (*DD*, 145); 'A surprise that came to him before his first vacation, strengthened the silent consciousness of a grief within, which might be compared in some ways with Byron's susceptibility about his deformed foot' (*DD*, 147); and perhaps most strikingly, 'The sense of an entailed disadvantage – the deformed foot doubtfully hidden by the shoe, makes a restlessly active spiritual yeast, and easily turns a self-centred, unloving nature into an Ishmaelite' (*DD*, 148). Although Deronda's nature is of 'the rarer sort' that resists such distortion, the reference to 'Ishmaelite', with its connotation of both Jew – Ishmael being a son of Abraham – and outcast provides a clue to his situation, and at this point in the novel, especially in the context of imagery of maiming, injury and deformity, the only characteristic that could clearly connect Deronda with Jewishness is circumcision.

Chase's general view of the novel, that the 'triumph of idealism over irony is written into the very structure of the novel's double plot',<sup>18</sup> is fundamentally conventional in seeing the novel as structurally flawed. Clearly, as Chase implies, such idealism is suspect if it is dependent on disregarding circumcision.

But, if circumcision is seen as indirectly present, one can take a different view of the relation between idealism and irony in the novel. Although idealism is not subverted, irony is still allowed its place. In a novel in which Romantic preoccupations are so much in evidence, one should not be surprised that Romantic irony is incorporated into the narrative structure. Circumcision is relevant to this since it casts an ironical light on Deronda's Jewishness and on the concept of cause, which assumes that there is equilibrium or logical relation between cause and effect. The exalted role Mordecai envisages for Deronda as the bearer of 'the sacred inheritance of the Jew' (*DD*, 428) and Deronda's hopeful identification with it are for Mordecai dependent on Deronda's being a Jew by race, yet at first the only attribute that associates him with Jewishness is circumcision, which at first he cannot securely interpret. The deep-seated human desire for causal order and proportion, both in the world and in narrative, is mocked by the disequilibrium that exists between the triviality of this sign and the magnitude of the consequences that may (or may not if it was done merely for hygienic reasons or to inhibit infant masturbation) follow from it.

There can, of course, be no conclusive proof that Eliot intended circumcision to be a signifying presence in the novel, unless documentary evidence is discovered.<sup>19</sup> But clearly the novel itself raises the subject and critics must decide which of the three attitudes that it is possible to have towards it is most defensible: namely that it is a signifying presence, a signifying absence or performs no signifying function. My argument that it is a signifying presence undermines the still common view that Eliot's fiction embodies Victorian high-mindedness and moral earnestness and accepts the constraints that operated upon the imagination of the novelist during the Victorian period. It is difficult to reconcile this image of her with circumcision being indirectly signified in *Daniel Deronda* and clues being provided to its presence. The role of circumcision, I would suggest, points to an element of comic playfulness in the text which coexists with its serious themes but which Eliot's Victorian image has generally prevented readers from noticing.<sup>20</sup>

## Formal Experiment and Ideological Critique: *Silas Marner* and ‘Victorian Values’

In the previous chapters I have tried to show that what makes Eliot stand apart from her contemporaries and indeed most of the writers who come after her is that she was not only a major intellectual who engaged with what she saw as the significant issues of her time but also a self-conscious artist who aims to integrate the intellectual and the literary, and whose attempt to do so led her to anticipate literary modernism in several respects. Though support for this position up to now has been primarily through discussion of the later fiction, especially *Daniel Deronda*, one should beware of creating too radical a division between the earlier and later novels. The novel which might appear to be most resistant to the view of Eliot as intellectual and self-conscious artist engaged in cultural critique is *Silas Marner*, a work which has given many critics some trouble to interpret and which, like *Daniel Deronda*, has often been seen as incoherent: ‘a work of uncertain form and dubious perspective’.<sup>1</sup> The historical accident that for a long time it was regarded as a novel suitable for school children does not make this resistance any easier to overcome. In the following analysis I shall suggest that *Silas Marner* is not fundamentally different in its conception and literary aims from her later novels, and as with *Daniel Deronda* there may also be some literary playfulness.

In the good (or bad, depending on one’s point of view) old days when it was taken as a matter of course that classic literary texts were central to any English syllabus, *Silas Marner* was one of the most widely studied of Victorian novels in schools. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, was that it was short by nineteenth-century standards as well as being perceived as a simple story written in an accessible style. But perhaps even more important was its identification with Victorian moral idealism since it would appear to present a world in which moral order is intrinsic and triumphs over moral disorder, with the good being rewarded and the bad being punished. In an edition of the novel for schools first published in 1912 and often reprinted the editor discusses the appropriateness of *Silas Marner* as a school text and states,

[A]bove all, the ethical interest must be paramount; and no treatment of *Silas Marner* can be really educative which does not make its appeal to the moral consciousness. It is in the belief justified by a long experience that in this lies

the true value of the teaching of literature, that this edition of *Silas Marner* is included in the series of English Literature for Schools.<sup>2</sup>

What were perceived as 'Victorian values' remained powerful well into the twentieth century, and the prescribing of literary texts in schools must have played some part in sustaining them. What makes *Silas Marner* a particularly significant text in cultural terms is that the moral certainties associated with 'Victorian values' appeared to be more straightforwardly asserted in this novel than in almost any other literary text of the period. Indeed it might be claimed that it exemplifies the theory of fiction proclaimed by Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when she describes her lost novel in the following terms: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.' Wilde was clearly satirizing what he believed to be the simple-minded moralism and optimism of Victorian fiction, which *Silas Marner* has been perceived as exemplifying and which almost certainly accounts for its former prominence as a school text. This use of the novel in schools to promote Victorian ideology not only in Britain but also in America may have been a significant factor in continuing the decline of Eliot's reputation as an artist beyond the late nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century, since it reinforced the view of her as a heavy Victorian moralist.

In certain political circles there have been demands both for a 'return to Victorian values' and for the restoration of classic literary texts to English syllabuses in schools, demands that are clearly not unconnected. It may be that *Silas Marner* will again be thought of as an ideal school text. I shall suggest that it is not as amenable a text as proponents of 'Victorian values' may think and that only critical impercipience allowed it to be seen in such terms in the past. Even though there has been critically sophisticated discussion of *Silas Marner*, such criticism has not, I think, directly called into question the assumption that the novel promulgates Victorian moral certainties.<sup>3</sup>

*Silas Marner* is difficult to categorize within Eliot's fiction. It can either be seen as the end of her early phase or the beginning of her mature style. It has links with her first novel *Adam Bede* in that it deals with English rural life; yet in structure it is similar to her later work since all of her novels from *Silas Marner* onwards employ a double plot. Eliot is, of course, noted for her commitment to realism in fiction; yet *Silas Marner* has often been seen as more akin to myth or fairy tale, which has aroused a certain critical disapproval: '*Silas Marner* is simply an allegorical fairy-tale'<sup>4</sup>; it is 'essentially a myth of spiritual rebirth'.<sup>5</sup> Also divine providence appears to be at work in the novel, rewarding the good and punishing the bad, which would suggest that it embodies a religious or metaphysical meaning; yet how is this to be reconciled with the fact that Eliot's other writings indicate that she had rejected religious and metaphysical beliefs? Readings of the novel which assume that it is a simple and straightforward moral fable are weakened by ignoring these considerations, which complicate the question of interpretation.

One significant fact that needs to be taken into account is that Eliot acknowledged the influence of Wordsworth on the novel, and its connections with certain of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* is obvious.<sup>6</sup> Both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Silas Marner* may seem simple in style when compared with other texts by their authors, and both writers are clearly drawing on traditional ballads and fairy tales, but one should not forget that they are sophisticated writers adopting an apparently simple style for their own purposes. Their texts cannot be credibly interpreted as if they were genuine ballads or fairy tales.

To look at the question of realism in *Silas Marner* first of all, though critics have seen the novel as resembling a fairy tale or myth and therefore as a departure from the realist representation associated with her other fiction – as Leavis puts it, ‘the atmosphere precludes too direct a reference ... to our everyday sense of how things happen’<sup>7</sup> – there is no evidence that Eliot regarded the novel as a break from realism. Although the ‘atmosphere’ may often resemble a fairy tale nothing that happens in the novel is irreconcilable with a rational perspective on the world, as one critic admits: ‘[It] is constructed completely within the limits of conventional realism, with careful attention to probability and verisimilitude of detail’.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the novel contains what appear to be some striking departures from conventional realism, but these, I believe, should not be seen as belonging to the ‘world’ of the novel but as the outcome of an aesthetic strategy. Though the events and situations in themselves are not intrinsically different from those depicted in her other novels, at the level of style and narrative structure the novel draws much more obviously upon fairy tale and myth. To put the matter in terms of narrative theory, there is a discontinuity between ‘story’ – the basic material of the novel – and ‘discourse’ – how that material is rendered in artistic terms; a story that is ‘realist’ in its philosophical basis – unlike fairy tales, myths and legends – is represented using some of the devices of fairy tales, myths and legends.

An example of such discontinuity is the association of weavers at the beginning of the novel with ‘the remnants of a disinherited race’, ‘alien-looking men’ who ‘rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden’.<sup>9</sup> They are ‘wandering men’ who are viewed with suspicion by their rural neighbours. Yet these weavers are not in reality Wandering Jew figures belonging to a Romantic world remote from historical specificity. They are clearly products of the Industrial Revolution, and the burden they carry is not the consequence of some mysterious sin committed in the past but contains the thread and other materials they require to practise their trade. The dehumanizing effect of the Industrial Revolution is conveyed by using language and symbols associated with early Romanticism to turn the weavers into alienated, rootless wanderers, but the historical reality retains its integrity. This illustrates in miniature the aesthetic strategy employed in the novel.

Another example of this discontinuity is Silas’s strange fits in which he goes into a death-like trance. These are crucial to the plot; yet they seem too

bizarre to be appropriate to fiction in a realist tradition. People in Lantern Yard or Raveloe have no idea what causes them, and they contribute to the Romantic or fairy-tale atmosphere of the novel. Yet the narrator makes it clear that there is a medical explanation for Silas's condition, namely catalepsy. Silas's association with Romantic figures such as Wordsworth's leech gatherer or Michael and most obviously Coleridge's Ancient Mariner is plain from the way he is presented, but realism is, I would suggest, not compromised at the level of 'story'.

A sign that *Silas Marner* is not a simple fairy-tale-like story but a highly self-conscious literary exercise in narrative construction is its punning and metaphoric language. Its subtitle is 'The Weaver of Raveloe' and as Marner weaves thread to make cloth, Eliot (or more exactly her narrator) weaves text to make narrative. 'Text' is, of course, derived from the Latin verb 'texere', to weave. There is also a pun on the term 'tale',<sup>10</sup> which is used to mean both a weight or quantity of cloth as in 'he worked into the night to finish the tale of Mrs Osgood's table-linen sooner than she expected ... He seems to weave, like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection' (*SM*, 15) and to mean 'story' as in Mr Macey's response to Silas's account of the theft of his gold: 'For, says I, you talk o' Master Marner making out a tale – why, it's nonsense, that is: it 'ud take a 'cute man to make out a tale like that' (*SM*, 76). Silas's spider-like weaving is further developed metaphorically when 'weaving ... reduce[s] his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect' (*SM*, 15) and leads to an 'insect-like existence' (*SM*, 16). A spider, of course, weaves a web and Silas's 'weaving' involves 'looking towards the end of his pattern, or towards the end of his web'. This use of 'web' anticipates *Middlemarch*, where 'web' is used metaphorically to refer to the organization and structure of narrative. Other metaphoric connections between 'weaving' and the writing of narrative are suggested by Silas accusing William Dane of having 'woven a plot to lay the sin at my door' (*SM*, 12) and a farrier 'taking up the thread of discourse' (*SM*, 44) in the Rainbow tavern. The fundamental difference between the novel as a literary form and fairy tale or myth is that in the latter the narrative and linguistic dimensions do not need to be synthesized – the narrative being open to being rendered in multiple forms of linguistic expression – in contrast to literary texts, and this is self-consciously demonstrated in *Silas Marner* where punning and metaphoric play of language indicate that it is a literary artefact and not a fairy tale in any ordinary sense.

As I mentioned previously, this is the first of Eliot's novels to use a double plot, and it is clear that Silas's and Godfrey Cass's stories are inextricably connected. The Romantic atmosphere of the novel allows Eliot to create a more fable-like structure than would be possible in conventionally realist fiction where such structuring would have to be understated so as not to undermine the reader's sense of realism. Silas and Godfrey represent two differing perspectives on life which are brought into confrontation with experience. It may not be

insignificant that *Silas Marner* was written shortly after Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, for the world that Silas and Godfrey have to face – far from being fairy-tale-like – can be seen as Darwinian in basis; that is, a world in which there is no evidence of a divine or providential order, with chance, circumstance or accident playing an important role. It is such a world that Silas and Godfrey have to confront.

Chance is a significant factor in *Silas Marner*. The narrator informs us that 'Favourable Chance ... is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in' (*SM*, 71). Silas has been brought up to accept the view that the world is governed by a divine order, and when accused of robbery he puts his faith in the drawing of lots to prove his innocence, believing that 'God will clear me' (*SM*, 11). Godfrey, however, relies on chance to rescue him from a set of circumstances that threatens to ruin his life: a degrading marriage that would result in him losing his inheritance and being denied the possibility of marrying Nancy Lammeter. When chance in the form of drawing lots goes against Silas, it destroys his faith in a beneficent God and he retreats into despair: 'there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent' (*SM*, 12). Godfrey, however, profits from chance. By waiting on events and being prepared to adapt to them, he avoids ruin: 'The longer the interval, the more chance there was of deliverance from some, at least, of the hateful consequences to which he had sold himself' (*SM*, 31). His wife dies without their marriage or the fact that he has fathered a child being disclosed, and his brother Dunstan, the only other person who knows about the marriage, disappears. Godfrey has gambled with events and won. He is now free to marry his 'paradise' (*SM*, 30), Nancy Lammeter, and inherits his father's property on his death. No relation is revealed between human desert or justice and what happens in the world. Silas had put his faith in a moral order in the world controlled by a beneficent God but that faith is shattered. In contrast, Godfrey has gambled with events and won.

Although the world of *Silas Marner* is one that reflects Darwinian ideas, the novel nevertheless suggests that this need not undermine human notions of a moral order, since the absence of an immanent moral order in the world has no necessary bearing on how human beings ought to live. Those characters in Eliot's novels such as Godfrey who try to exploit chance and circumstance to serve their own immoral or selfish purposes are clearly treated with little sympathy, for the novel implies that Darwinian natural selection has no tenable application to human society. This attitude to Darwinism was untypical of the period. As discussed in Chapter 1, those who grasped what the theory meant in scientific terms but who believed that morality was dependent on the existence of a moral order in the world claimed that Darwinian theory could have negative social consequences; human individuals would no longer have any incentive to behave morally since for Darwinists the survival of species had no relation to morality but was dependent on adaptation to a constantly

changing world. Others who interpreted Darwin less scientifically and who were influenced by Herbert Spencer's translation of natural selection into the 'survival of the fittest' believed that Darwinism demonstrated the existence of an order in the natural world founded upon struggle and conflict and one should accept that this applied equally to the human and social world. While Darwin's concept of 'natural selection' was neutral in evaluative terms, the term 'fittest' could be taken to mean those most fit to survive. *Silas Marner*, the first of Eliot's novels to reflect strongly the influence of Darwinism, suggests that Eliot rejected both these readings of Darwinism from the start, though her critique was continued more directly in later novels such as *Felix Holt*, as I have tried to show earlier.

*Silas Marner* shows, however, that the undermining of the idea of an immanent moral order could have disastrous effects. Silas's response to the shattering of his faith when the drawing of lots reveals him to be guilty when he knows he is innocent is to construct a mechanical way of life for himself: 'Strangely Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life' (*SM*, 19). The main elements of this mechanical life are work and money; nothing else matters to him until his encounter with Eppie. Of course, work and money were all too prominent features of Victorian life, and it seems certain that Eliot is implying a relationship between the Victorian preoccupation with them and loss of faith. Marner's mechanistic life functions allegorically as a commentary on the alienation Eliot suggests permeates Victorian culture. Likewise Godfrey's hope that he will be rescued by a fortunate turn of events has wider implications. The reader is told that he 'can hardly be called specially old-fashioned' (*SM*, 71) in conducting his life in this way. He is seen as typical of people in Eliot's own time, even though the novel is set some sixty years in the past: 'Let even a polished man of these days get into a position he is ashamed to avow, and his mind will be bent on all the possible issues that may deliver him from the calculable results of that position' (*SM*, 71). Silas with his Ancient Mariner associations and Godfrey (God-free) represent symbolically different forms of Victorian alienation.

Yet, apparently, good eventually triumphs: the man who had believed there was an intrinsic moral order in the world wins out at the end over the calculating gambler on chance. It is this triumph of good that has persuaded some critics that the novel finally supports a providentialist view of the world. In a previous chapter I argued that U. C. Knoepfelmacher's view that "'mystery" ... is allowed to survive in this legendary tale ... where obstacles come in threes',<sup>11</sup> confused 'story' and 'discourse'. Another way of putting this is that it mistakes style and artistic expression for philosophical content. The triumph of 'good' in the novel is not a matter of arbitrary rewards and punishments being administered to Silas and Godfrey. I shall rather suggest that the moral position the novel takes would be unchanged if Silas had lost Eppie and Godfrey had succeeded in taking her from Silas.



Silas had believed that moral equilibrium is structured into the world and is thus shattered when he is unjustly pronounced guilty of theft. Godfrey in gambling with events in effect rejects such moral equilibrium. The novel shows, however, that people have a psychological need for such equilibrium even if it does not exist. As Eliot's narrator states in *Romola*, 'Justice is like the Kingdom of God – it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning'.<sup>12</sup> Since Godfrey's rewards are not in equilibrium with his sense of his deserts, he is vulnerable to guilt. He also has to adopt a role which is at odds with his inner self since he cannot acknowledge his past actions to others, not even to Nancy, the person closest to him. Because of the fear that the past may come to light he is accompanied by 'his importunate companion, Anxiety' (*SM*, 85). Godfrey's eventual acknowledgement of providence – 'Everything comes to light, Nancy, sooner or later. When God Almighty wills it, our secrets are found out' (*SM*, 157) – should be seen in this psychological context.

In *Early Victorian Novelists* David Cecil claimed that Eliot imposed an arbitrary moral order on the text by punishing Godfrey through making him childless:

George Eliot vindicates the moral order by making him [Godfrey] childless. This is not in the least an inevitable consequence of his act. There is no inherent reason in the nature of things why a morally-feeble man should not beget twenty children. In consequence we feel Godfrey's discontent to be no inevitable expression of the moral law, but a gratuitous piece of poetic justice imposed on him by the arbitrary will of his creator.<sup>13</sup>

Cecil ignores the fact that Godfrey's success in avoiding the consequences of his past actions and marrying Nancy resulted from his gambling with events and winning. But gamblers always lose sooner or later. Godfrey's predicament is not so much 'a gratuitous piece of poetic justice' as a piece of bad luck. Since he has had so much good luck previously, it is not difficult for the reader to accept that his luck should run out. Although he interprets it as God's retribution – understandable in the light of his continuous sense of guilt and anxiety – there is no reason why the reader should agree with him.

Silas, however, would seem to provide support for Godfrey's view as he has his belief in providence restored. He says to Dolly Winthrop, 'There's good i' this world – I've a feeling o' that now ... That drawing o' the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us – there's dealings' (*SM*, 141). Yet even though his money is returned he says that if he lost Eppie 'I might come to think I was forsaken again, and lose the feeling that God was good to me' (*SM*, 160). He has no sooner said that than Godfrey and Nancy come knocking at his door to ask for Eppie. Just as in *Lantern Yard* his belief in providence will be tested.

But whereas in *Lantern Yard* Silas's identity had been shattered with the collapse of his faith in benevolent providence, the significance of this second crisis is that it indicates that a belief in providence is no longer central to

Silas's identity. Although he had regarded Eppie as having been sent to him as a substitute for the loss of his gold, he is able to rise above such views and ceases to regard her as his possession. He allows her to choose: 'Eppie, my child, speak. I won't stand in your way. Thank Mr and Mrs Cass' (*SM*, 163). But when Eppie rejects Godfrey's offer and he then asserts his claim to her as her natural father, Silas suffers his greatest test. Even though he had been prepared to let Eppie choose, confident no doubt that she would choose him, Godfrey's claim that she is his by right again creates the spectre that there is no beneficent God and that the world is devoid of justice – 'God gave her to me because you turned your back upon her, and He looks upon her as mine: you've no right to her!' (*SM*, 164) – a view that Godfrey regards as 'very selfish' (*SM*, 165). Yet instead of reacting in the same way as he had done in Lantern Yard when the drawing of lots goes against him, Silas transcends questions of theology through experiencing the primary Wordsworthian feeling of sympathy. Fearing that 'he should be raising his own will as an obstacle to Eppie's good' (*SM*, 166), the question as to who has the greater right to Eppie – a mechanical view of the issue – ceases to matter: the right is what is good for Eppie: 'I'll say no more. Let it be as you will. Speak to the child. I'll hinder nothing' (*SM*, 166).

The significance of this is that Silas is able to set aside absolute notions of what is right or what is good and instead sees the right and the good in humanist terms. The right is what is good for Eppie; it is not an absolute which exists external to humanity. Whether God has decreed that Silas is entitled to Eppie becomes a matter of no importance; it is the human considerations that are paramount. Even if Eppie had chosen to go with her natural father, it is clear that Silas would not have retreated into his previous sense of alienation. He would have borne her loss through renunciation since the relation to the world he has established in Raveloe is one which is no longer dependent on the sense that the world is providentially ordered. If one interprets the novel as a fairy tale about a man who is rewarded by the workings of a benevolent providence, the novel's humanist message is lost.

What makes Silas able to allow Eppie to choose the good rather than to see the good in absolute terms is that he is now an integrated member of the community of Raveloe and Eppie is a living person to him, not a mere possession like his gold. The theft of his gold and then the coming of Eppie had resulted in Silas becoming more and more a part of this community, and significantly in Raveloe rigid theological ideas such as divine providence have no place. The religious life of Raveloe is one which emphasizes human relationship, not theological concepts. Even without Eppie Silas would have had the community to fall back on.

Notoriously Margaret Thatcher – who urged a return to Victorian values – asserted that '[t]here is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, there are families'.<sup>14</sup> This view is certainly not borne out in *Silas*

*Marner*. Indeed, for Eliot human identity is social in a constitutive sense and those of her characters, such as Tito in *Romola* or Christian in *Felix Holt*, who attempt to live purely individualistic lives virtually cease to have human identities. *Silas Marner* attacks on a number of fronts ideas and beliefs that have been seen as characteristically Victorian. Morality and justice are shown not as immanent in the world, as most Victorians would have believed, but as social in origin and thus purely human constructions, though not the less valid for that. The devotion to work and money, strongly associated with the Victorian ethos and a feature of Victorianism much admired by those who urge a 'return to Victorian values', is represented as symptomatic of an alienation from the human. Silas becomes humanized not merely by having to care for another human being but by taking part in the community life of Raveloe. It would not be wrong to describe Raveloe as an organic community and to see *Silas Marner* as a novel that uses organicist ideas derived from the Romantics and from such writers as Carlyle as part of an implicit attack on the dominance of 'mechanistic' structures in mid-Victorian British society. In her essay of 1856, 'The Natural History of German Life', Eliot had criticized the application of mechanistic theories to social life – 'that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations' – though there is no rejection of sociology as such or idealization of peasant communities and their customs and traditions, recognizing, for example, their 'communal exclusiveness – the resistance to the indiscriminate establishment of strangers', evident in *Marner's* initial treatment in Raveloe. It is a weakness of 'modern liberalism' for Eliot that it merely condemns this on rationalistic grounds rather than developing a more scientifically based sociology in which 'there is an advance from the general to the special, from the simple to the complex, analogous with that which is found in the series of the sciences, from Mathematics to Biology'.<sup>15</sup>

Eliot is thus not a conventional organicist who rejects rationally based social theory, and she is well aware that organicist ideas are vulnerable to attack on the grounds that they idealize the past. Clearly Raveloe is not idealized despite the fairy tale and mythic atmosphere of the novel. The upper class represented by the Casses is largely cut off from the community. The people of the town are in many respects unenlightened; they make little effort at first to help the incomer Silas and treat him with suspicion. It is years before he is accepted by them. Eliot is aware of the dangers of such communities being inward looking and unwelcoming to strangers. Though Dolly Winthrop may be a warm and generous person, her ignorance is apparent and her advice to Silas at times unreliable, notably when she urges the necessity to discipline Eppie: 'I put it upo' your conscience, Master Marner, as there's one of 'em you must choose – ayther smacking or the coal-hole – else she'll get so masterful, there'll be no holding her' (*SM*, 125). Yet the value of Raveloe is clear: it does possess a spirit of community, and though people in the village are reluctant to reach out to what they perceive as other, Silas is finally accepted by them. Both benefit

from this coming together: Silas is no longer an alienated consciousness, and Raveloe has overcome its fear of the other, become less inward looking and accepted him. This spirit of community is reinforced by various ceremonies, such as going to Church and the New Year dance, that are intrinsic to Raveloe life and which, together with a story such as the Lammeters' wedding that has become something of a community myth, create a sense of shared consciousness. At Eppie's christening Silas 'shared in the observances held sacred by his neighbours' (*SM*, 123). Religion in Raveloe is not associated with a rigid theology; rather it is inseparable from the social fabric. Silas has become integrated into a society that can absorb good and bad fortune and is thus less vulnerable to the amoral development of events.

Although superficially it might seem that Silas is rewarded and Godfrey punished when Eppie chooses to stay with Silas rather than go with her natural father, Eppie's choice of Silas is not an arbitrary one. It is in keeping with the novel's critique of the 'mechanical'. Godfrey may be Eppie's natural father, but her relationship to him has no human substance; Silas is her father in human terms. It is also more than Silas that she chooses. To take her place in the class-conscious world of the Casses would be to reject the community in which she has been brought up and would cut her off from her past: 'I wasn't brought up to be a lady, and I can't turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways' (*SM*, 168). Modern advocates of 'Victorian values' often point to the importance of the nuclear family in creating stability and security in both social and individual terms during the Victorian period and contrast this with the instability and insecurity created in recent times by the emergence of large numbers of one-parent families. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that in *Silas Marner*, a one-parent family – admittedly with community support – is seen in very positive terms, with one parent successfully combining paternal and maternal roles and bringing up a child who shows every sign of developing into a well-adjusted and socially responsible adult.

It may seem more difficult to demonstrate that even if Godfrey had been successful in gaining Eppie the moral scheme of the novel would have been unchanged. David Cecil suggests that in depriving Godfrey of children, Eliot is arbitrarily punishing him. But what the novel suggests is that even if Godfrey's luck had persisted, his life would have continued to be a failure in human terms. For Godfrey's life is founded upon the search for gratification. Exploiting chance and the desire for gratification are connected: the 'more chance ... of deliverance ... the more opportunities remained for him to snatch the strange gratification of seeing Nancy, and gathering some faint indications of her lingering regard' (*SM*, 31). Even Nancy is associated with gratification though he thinks of her in religious terms: he had 'wooed her with tacit patient worship, as the woman who made him think of the future with joy ... And yet the hope of this paradise had not been enough to save him from a course which shut him out of it for ever' (*SM*, 81). In paradise one is beyond desire and the

quest for gratification because paradise by definition implies that one's desires are completely fulfilled and therefore no lack persists leading to further desire for gratification. Yet even after he has achieved 'paradise' by marrying Nancy, having exploited chance to escape from his past actions, desire as lack does not cease as his failure to father a child by Nancy prevents gratification being complete. The language used to describe his feelings when he fails to gain Eppie implies that it is gratification that motivates him: 'Godfrey felt an irritation inevitable to almost all of us when we encounter an unexpected obstacle' (SM, 164), and at the end of the chapter his feelings on failure consist in 'frustration' (SM, 168).

One can conclude from this that even if Eppie had chosen to go with him and Nancy gratification would have been only temporarily satisfied for Godfrey because there will always be something lacking to make desire complete. Nancy as 'paradise' had proved insufficient; her childlessness was a lack which generated a new desire. Godfrey cannot accept renunciation, like Silas, or Nancy's more rigid identification of the development of events with providence, as ways of controlling desire:

Meanwhile, why could he not make up his mind to the absence of children from a hearth brightened by such a wife? Why did his mind fly uneasily to that void, as if it were the sole reason why life was not thoroughly joyous to him? I suppose it is the way with all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life never *can* be thoroughly joyous: under the vague dulness of the grey hours, dissatisfaction seeks a definite object, and finds it in the privation of an untried good. (SM, 154, emphasis in original)

Desire is seen as an intrinsic force within human beings that cannot be quenched since no gratification of desire can be complete, as Carlyle maintained in *Sartor Resartus*:

[T]he shoeblack also has a Soul quite other than his Stomach; and would require ... for his permanent satisfaction and saturation, simply this allotment, no more, and no less: *God's infinite universe altogether to himself* ... No sooner is your ocean filled, than he grumbles that it might have been of better vintage.<sup>16</sup>

Again this suggests that those characters who commit themselves to desire or the will and experience frustration are not defeated arbitrarily. For Eliot as for Carlyle and also Schopenhauer,<sup>17</sup> whom she had read, people such as Godfrey who live a life based upon the gratification of desire will always end up frustrated.

At the level of the individual, then, the underlying philosophy of the novel is one of apparent pessimism: there is no God, at least no just God who takes account of human hopes or deserts, and even if one obtains everything that one desires, it will never be enough to satisfy. Nancy articulates the latter philosophy when she remarks to Godfrey after he has disclosed the fact that he is Eppie's father: 'I wasn't worth doing wrong for – nothing is in this world. Nothing is so good as it seems beforehand – not even our marrying wasn't, you see'

(*SM*, 159). One has, of course, to balance against this the loving relationship between Silas and Eppie, which is at the centre of the novel. However, even here Silas is never free from the anxiety that Eppie will be taken away from him leaving him bereft in a similar manner to his experience in Lantern Yard. He tells Eppie ‘how his soul was utterly desolate till she was sent to him’ (*SM*, 160) and the fear that he could return to this state if he lost her, in addition to the fear that God having abandoned him once could do so again, means that his happiness is constantly compromised by a sense of anxiety. She has mysteriously come into his life and she could just as easily be taken away from him, as he finds out. Silas’s anxiety about losing Eppie is only a heightened form of that which all people – consciously or subconsciously – experience, as eventually a symbolic ‘knocking at the door’ (*SM*, 160) will come to threaten all relationships as human beings exist in a world of change which, the novel suggests, is indifferent to human feeling.

It could be argued that even if the novel takes a pessimistic view of human life at the level of the individual, it is more optimistic at the social level. Marner is eventually integrated into Raveloe, a society with shared implicit values and assumptions which provides some protection from the amoral world of chance that is a continual threat to human beings at an individual level. In an earlier discussion of the novel I suggested that one of the functions of Raveloe was as a kind of model of an organic community for Eliot’s contemporary Victorian society, performing a role similar to that of feudal society in Carlyle’s *Past and Present*.<sup>18</sup> Though the latter sort of societies belonged to the past and could not be imitated in the present they could serve as examples of a shared social and cultural consciousness that industrialized societies needed to find a new form for in the contemporary world. However, another perspective is also implied. Even if Raveloe acts as a model for the present, it also testifies to the disappearance of the kind of community spirit achieved in such a society in Victorian Britain. Carlyle’s writings are full of despair about the ability of Victorian industrialized society to change course and make itself ‘organic’. He refers in *Past and Present* to ‘the immense Industrial Ages, as yet all inorganic, and in a quite pulpy condition, requiring desperately to harden themselves into some organism!’<sup>19</sup> but the impression one forms from most of his writing is of profound pessimism that such a change can happen. The emphasis is very much on the spiritual disaster that will result if contemporary society remains mechanistic.

Likewise Eliot expresses at times a Carlylean despair at the consequences for any society that remains ‘inorganic’ and therefore alienated, as in this passage from her poem ‘In a London Drawing Room’:

All hurry on & look upon the ground,  
 Or glance unmarking at the passers by.  
 The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages  
 All closed, in multiple identity.

The world seems one huge prison-house & court  
 Where men are punished at the slightest cost  
 With lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.<sup>20</sup>

Although her writing continually emphasizes the importance of ideals in shaping action, there seems little optimism that Victorian society can be changed. As with Carlyle, though of course less melodramatically expressed, pessimism about the mechanistic tendencies of contemporary British society is the dominating tone. This culminates in *Daniel Deronda* where Deronda rejects England in favour of a proto-Zionist ideal. There seems little likelihood of organicist values having any impact in Britain, an imperialist country committed to free-market economics and globalization. In relation to *Silas Marner*, this suggests that the positive social forces of the pre-industrialized Raveloe, which reclaim Marner from his mechanistic devotion to work and money, no longer exist in the England of the 1860s and seem unlikely to exist in the future, though as I shall discuss later there is an element of messianic hope in Eliot's writings that acts as a counter to pessimism.

*Silas Marner* is thus a work which in important respects presents a radical critique of the dominant Victorian ideology. Significantly, however, most critics have not even considered such a view of it because they have identified the form of the novel, with its mythic and fairy-tale-like aspects, with its content and thus have perceived it as a simple moral story, which they either admire or criticize depending on their ideological perspective. But as I have tried to show, the novel is a highly self-conscious fictional construction in which the relationship between form, style and content is complex. Its fairy-tale-like surface masks a world which, far from exhibiting the presence of an immanent moral order, is Darwinian in its conception since it is indifferent, taking no account of human needs or hopes. Silas Marner's religious world view cannot survive confrontation with such a world, and the work ethic he constructs as a response to his alienation is depicted as a desperate, mechanistic attempt to impose some kind of order on a life devoid of meaning, while the money he accumulates by work only accentuates his estrangement. Optimism and a belief in progress are ideas very much associated with the Victorian ethos but they are little in evidence in the novel. The only reason that the 'bad' end unhappily is that, since desire can never be fully satisfied, they are bound to experience frustration and may find that less easy to bear than the 'good'. Instead of the future promising improvement, the novel suggests, in its implicit contrast between Raveloe – not a perfect but at least a partially organic community – and contemporary Victorian society, that organic social structures belong to the past and that their existence in post-industrial society is problematic. All of this, of course, was clearly not evident to earlier generations who prescribed the novel as a set text in schools. I would suggest that modern advocates of Victorian values looking for texts to promote them might be well advised to steer clear of *Silas Marner*.

## The Post-Colonial Critique of Eliot: Is Edward Said Right about *Daniel Deronda*?

Fundamental to Eliot's ambition as a writer was her aspiration not only to make a significant cultural contribution as intellectual and artist but also to engage with the major issues of her time, as the writers she most admired, such as Milton or Goethe, had done. I have already discussed her critique of Darwinism, the Byronic and – in Chapter 9 – the ascendancy of 'mechanistic' thinking in regard to social questions. But among the issues she confronted which in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been of particular interest to literary critics and theorists are nationalism, identity, colonialism, race, imperialism, cosmopolitanism, which are of course all related to each other. Not only has this made her one of the most discussed writers among recent critical and cultural theorists, but her work may be seen as more pertinent to recent cultural debates than that of her literary contemporaries or even her modernist successors. She is, for example, a key figure for leading cultural theorist Amanda Anderson, who considers her at some length in her book *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*, a 'companion piece'<sup>1</sup> to her theoretical study *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. But while Anderson takes a predominantly positive view of Eliot, many post-colonial-influenced critics have tended to be negative in their views, often scathingly so. Her negative critics are right to recognize the importance of her writing to political and, especially, post-colonial issues, but in tending to see it as reflective of attitudes and assumptions they see as having their roots in right-wing ideologies that were powerful in the Victorian period, they do not give sufficient credit to Eliot as a significant thinker in her own right who cannot as easily be pinned down politically. Her ideas on subjects such as nationalism or colonialism deserve to be taken seriously in their own terms and may still have a contribution to make to current debates, as I shall try to show in the next few chapters.

*Daniel Deronda* and, to a lesser extent, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* have been the major focus of critical discussion in this area. Whereas previously critical controversy regarding *Daniel Deronda* centred on formal questions, such as the supposed split between the two plots, literary and cultural criticism of the past few decades has tended to concentrate more on the proto-Zionist theme and the political implications that derive from it. In some ways it is



easy to comprehend why this shift in critical interest has taken place as she is one of the few literary writers in the Victorian period who dealt in any depth with colonialism and imperialism. Recent critical discussion in relation to Eliot has thus tended to be dominated by political issues. In the next few chapters I shall consider whether political readings of Eliot by Edward Said and later post-colonial critics who have been influenced by him, particularly in relation to *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, can stand up to scrutiny and especially whether neglecting the literary to concentrate on the political is a defensible critical strategy with regard to a writer like Eliot who, as I have argued, has the highest ambition both as an intellectual and as an artist.

If one were asked to vote for the work of literature that has had the greatest effect on the world – assuming that the Bible or the Koran and other religious texts were excluded from the category of literature – then *Daniel Deronda* ought to be a strong contender. A case can be made that without it the state of Israel might not exist, and Israel of course has been at the centre of contemporary history and politics since it was founded in 1948 and continues to be. It has been claimed that its publication led to a fundamental change in Jewish attitudes to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine – ‘to hundreds of thousands of assimilated Jews, the story presented, for the first time, the possibility of a return to Zion’<sup>2</sup> – and the major figures in Zionism, Herzl and Weizmann, were certainly well aware of it and may even have read it. Also crucial to the foundation of Israel was the Balfour Declaration – ‘without it the Jewish state could never have come into existence’<sup>3</sup> – and it is likely that Balfour’s initial interest in the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine had been aroused by *Daniel Deronda*. It is perhaps significant that he visited Eliot in 1877, the year after the novel’s publication. Edward Said may have been aware of these facts and, as a Palestinian, his negative critique of *Daniel Deronda* in his writings on Zionism and the question of Palestine is understandable. Whether his critique is fair or persuasive is what I will address in this chapter.

Said’s view of *Daniel Deronda* as in sympathy with colonialism and Western imperialist attitudes to the East has considerably influenced current critical attitudes to it, particularly among post-colonial critics,<sup>4</sup> but one finds his view reflected now even in books designed for the general reader, Deronda’s departure for the East being seen as ‘uncomfortably close to the imperial adventurism common among Englishmen of his time and class, who go off to the colonies to find a role and make a reputation’.<sup>5</sup> *Daniel Deronda* is mentioned briefly by Said in his book *Orientalism*, generally associating it with an attitude to the Orient that reflects Western imperialist ideology, and he develops this argument in his essay, ‘Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims’. The obvious argument that could be used against Said is that Zionism in its nineteenth-century context is fundamentally different from European imperialism since Jews had once inhabited Palestine and had been driven out, and there was still a Jewish presence there, so that the major drive of early

Zionism was the desire for a cultural identity rooted in place for a people subject to different degrees of discrimination and oppression and not, as generally with European imperialism, economic exploitation. Said also accepts that in the late nineteenth century Palestine was already colonized: 'True, it was under Ottoman administration (and therefore already a colony)'.<sup>6</sup>

Yet such arguments are not in themselves sufficient to undermine Said's position, especially his claim that the Zionist Jews had been Europeanized and like European imperialists viewed Palestine 'as essentially empty of inhabitants, not because there were no inhabitants ... but because their status as sovereign and human inhabitants was systematically denied'.<sup>7</sup> Said provides evidence that some early Zionists, such as Moses Hess, equated colonizing Palestine with colonialism more generally, which they saw as bringing 'civilization' to the Orient, and he claims that Mordecai, the proto-Zionist prophet in *Daniel Deronda*, uses similar language to Hess. Despite the important difference I have mentioned between Zionism and European imperialism in general, colonization clearly was common to both, with Zionism creating, as Said asserts, 'Jewish colonies in the land of their ancestors',<sup>8</sup> and historically colonization almost inevitably leads to the existing population eventually being displaced or marginalized: 'Zionism essentially saw Palestine as the European imperialist did, as an empty territory paradoxically "filled" with ignoble or perhaps even dispensable natives'.<sup>9</sup> Said's position is that any form of colonization that sees the existing population as on a lower human level as a prelude to displacing them is ethically unacceptable. As he points out, for colonists, 'There is no question of consulting the natives of the territory where the new society is to be given birth'.<sup>10</sup> And, of course, if they were consulted beforehand, colonization would never happen. If one considers colonization historically, in virtually every case the existing occupiers have been seen as inferior by the colonizers and not 'as people having wishes, values, aspirations'.<sup>11</sup> For Said, this makes colonization intrinsically wrong, and such a view seems to be assumed in the post-colonial theory and criticism that Said's writings have greatly influenced.

Mordecai's speeches in the *Hand and Banner* tavern scene in Chapter 42 of *Daniel Deronda*, in which he urges the creation of 'an organic centre' for the Jews in Palestine and looks forward to their having a nation 'even as the sons of England and Germany' do, is regarded by Said as embodying Eliot's own proto-Zionist views. For him and for numerous other critics Mordecai is a mere spokesman for her. But looking at these speeches – especially in the light of the Jewish maiden and Gentile king episode at the end of Chapter 61, which reveals that Mordecai's idealism edits out inconvenient aspects of reality, and the critical angle on Mordecai which that scene implies – gives one a different perspective.<sup>12</sup> It is political rhetoric directed at a susceptible Deronda – 'it was to Deronda that he was speaking' (*DD*, 454) – not at the other members of the group, all of whom are familiar with Mordecai's ideas and disagree with them, and is meant to be seen as such. The culminating moment in his speech

advocating 'an organic centre' is his declaration: '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' (*DD*, 456–7). This rhetorical flourish is intended to prevent any discussion or consideration of 'difficulties', and the major difficulty must, of course, be the fact that European Jews would have to colonize the former land of their ancestors which now had a predominantly Arab population.

Eliot would have been familiar with the situation in Palestine as her friend, and almost certainly the principal model for Mordecai, Emanuel Deutsch, with whom she studied Hebrew, had been there in 1869 and had been powerfully affected by that experience; almost certainly he and Eliot would have discussed it. In a letter Eliot wrote to her publisher, John Blackwood, she indicates that she is well aware that if modern Jews are to have their own nation, it will involve colonization: 'There is a great movement now among the Jews towards colonising Palestine, and bringing out the resources of the soil' (*Letters*, VII, 109). It is significant, however, that Mordecai claims that if a Jewish nation were created in Palestine it would have an equal right to exist and similar standing to England and America as nations; once the Jews have 'an organic centre ... the outraged Jew shall have a defence in the court of nations, as the outraged Englishman or American' (*DD*, 456). The American example is particularly apposite as Mordecai makes clear when he points out that it is 'only two centuries since a vessel carried over the ocean the beginning of the great North American nation' (*DD*, 458), and Said himself links Zionism and the creation of America as a nation: 'Zionism (like the view of America as an empty land held by Puritans) was a colonial vision.'<sup>13</sup> No doubt the reason for the comparison between Jewish nationhood in Palestine and England and America is that both the latter were created through colonization. In the case of England there were numerous invasions by colonizers – by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans – and America had been colonized by the English from Tudor times. Mordecai's rhetoric, however, passes over the 'difficulties' of colonization before England and the America emerged as 'great' nations.

In the various colonizations of England – a name invented, of course, by the predominant colonizers – the 'wishes, values, and aspirations' of the existing population were never taken into account as the invaders were mostly bent on subjugating them, even exterminating them, or driving them to the fringes of the country. Before the creation of a 'great North American nation', the existing inhabitants were generally seen as savages and treated accordingly, and they were subjected to even more oppressive treatment after the colonizers gained freedom from British rule, and at the time Mordecai is speaking the American economy had to a significant extent depended on the labour of African slaves who were also predominantly regarded as intrinsically inferior to those of European descent. All of this familiar prehistory to the founding of England and America as nations is left out of account by Mordecai, and for Said and

those critics influenced by him Eliot colludes in this omission of the likely consequences of any Jewish colonizing of Palestine. But I shall argue that this view is open to question: the comparison Mordecai draws with England and America as nations enables the reader to see beyond the rhetoric and reflect on the 'difficulties'.

Eliot was well aware of the price of colonization and specifically refers to it with reference to England and America in the final chapter of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!'. The narrator, Theophrastus Such, gives special emphasis to the losers of history and does not seek to cover up what colonization entailed for the colonized in the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, with the Anglo-Saxon colonizers 'gradually conquering more and more of the pleasant land from the natives who knew nothing of Odin, and finally making unusually clean work in ridding themselves of those prior occupants'. These invaders were 'our fathers' and they 'massacred Britons' (*ITS*, 145–6), and their descendants behaved similarly in regard to the 'Red Indians' in the colonization of America.

There is plenty of evidence in Eliot's writings, fictional and non-fictional, of her sympathy with displaced or colonized peoples, Jews, Gypsies, Irish and of her opposition to British colonialism in India. But, unlike Said, she does not view colonization from an absolutist ethical standpoint. Mordecai's rhetoric may cover up the 'difficulties' in the interests of communicating to Deronda his idealistic vision, but Eliot would not, I think, have believed that Mordecai was wrong to see England and America as 'great' nations, despite the price that had to be paid in human blood and suffering for their creation. Although the bloody consequences of the various colonizations in the past are acknowledged, nevertheless for Theophrastus history moved on and a country called England eventually emerged, developed and acquired 'a national consciousness', a 'sense of corporate existence', a distinct identity for a people descended from diverse ethnic groups that had previously tended to slaughter each other, and of course that nation produced Shakespeare, Newton and Eliot herself. Similarly, an idea of America emerged that brought together an even greater ethnic diversity and whose constitution can be interpreted as proclaiming that all of its people, even its 'Red Indian' inhabitants and those descended from slaves, are included in the nation, even if those who signed the constitution may have interpreted it differently.

Does this mean that for Eliot, in contrast to Said's ethically absolutist position, the price of invasion and colonization is sometimes worth paying? And if England and America are examples of colonization that could be seen as eventually having a 'good' outcome, what about counter-examples in which colonization had negative or even disastrous consequences? There is no indication in *Daniel Deronda* or 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' that the horrific consequences of invasion and colonization could ever be justified by possible future benefits, but Eliot's implied view is that to object to colonization

absolutely is to object to history itself, since migration and colonization have been ubiquitous. To ask whether colonization in itself is a good or bad thing is the same as asking whether history is a good or bad thing. The narrator of 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' sees the fusion of races as inevitable (agreeing with Julius Klesmer in the novel, who looks forward to it): 'The tendency of things is towards the quicker or slower fusion of races. It is impossible to arrest this tendency' (*ITS*, 285), and colonization cannot be excluded from that tendency.

Although Mordecai is convinced that the return of Jews to Palestine will be beneficial not merely to the Jews but to the whole of humanity, the story of the Jewish maiden and the Gentile king is again pertinent, since it raises questions about Mordecai as an idealist. And does the novel's epigraph not provide a warning that because of an anarchic tendency within human nature things could always turn out badly? Even if seldom referred to by critics, it would not be out of place as an epigraph to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul:  
 There, 'mid the throng of hurrying desires  
 That trample on the dead to seize their spoil,  
 Lurks vengeance, footless, irresistible  
 As exhalations laden with slow death,  
 And o'er the fairest troop of captured joys  
 Breathes pallid pestilence.

*Daniel Deronda* is notable for its open-endedness, and the contemporaneous reader, of course, had no knowledge as to what might result from Mordecai's prophetic vision and Deronda's decision to devote his life to the cause of creating a nation for Jews in Palestine. Things are even more problematic for the modern reader. It is clear from Said's writings and the writings of those influenced by him that views about the creation of the state of Israel and its aftermath have had an impact on critical judgement. From Eliot's writings in general it is apparent that she was sympathetic to some nationalist movements at least, seeing them as resisting globalizing economic forces with their homogenizing effects and imperialist forms of colonialism related to those economic forces. But whether she intended the proto-Zionist aspect of the novel to promote actively the cause of Jewish nationhood in any simple political sense is doubtful: this would be to remove the Jewish theme from its artistic context. Nancy Henry has stated that Eliot avoided becoming involved at a political level in efforts to further Jewish colonization of Palestine:

Eliot had no wish to align herself with the efforts of certain Jewish and non-Jewish Englishmen ... to establish colonies in Palestine ... She has often been taken as an advocate of the colonization of Palestine based on isolated readings of *Deronda*, but her reluctance to celebrate early signs of its actual occurrence

suggested that she distinguished between the idea of Jewish nationalism and the practices of religious (mostly Christian) colonizers.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever Eliot's intention, readers now cannot help but read the novel in the context of the situation in the Middle East and almost inevitably wonder whether she would have regretted the proto-Zionist theme if she could have had second sight and seen the consequences of a Jewish state coming into being in Palestine. Implicit in the novel, however, is the unpredictability of future events. It is the certainty of the messianic visionary, such as Mordecai, in the face of that unpredictability which gives him his power. Without that power as manifested in Mordecai it is doubtful whether Deronda would have discovered a sense of partiality that he had previously lacked and the ideal that stems from Mordecai's prophetic vision which Deronda becomes 'possessed' with: 'that of restoring a political existence to my people' (*DD*, 688). But the narrator maintains a sense of distance with regard to the visionary's claim to have second sight – "Second-sight" is a flag over disputed ground' – and goes on to introduce a more sceptical note, 'No doubt there are abject specimens of the visionary', reflecting that in whatever category one looks at there will inevitably be bad examples: 'One is afraid to think of all that the genus "patriot" embraces' (*DD*, 404). Nor does Deronda, though his aspiration is to be 'an organic part of social life' (*DD*, 308), abandon the rational or analytic intellect despite making a commitment to Mordecai's ideal of Jewish nationhood with its grounding in Jewish mysticism. However, he refuses to dismiss Mordecai's claim to the prophetic, though he himself 'was not one of those quivering-poised natures that lend themselves to second-sight' (*DD*, 403). But, like the narrator, he is aware of the possibility that Mordecai may be a poor or unlucky example of the visionary and that his ideas could therefore have unfortunate consequences.

Difficulties of interpretation are present from the start of the novel. It opens with a series of questions raised by Deronda on first seeing Gwendolen: 'Is she beautiful or not beautiful?... Was the good or evil genius dominant in these beams?' (*DD*, 3). Is Mordecai a visionary who can be compared to great visionaries of the past, or is he mad? Mr Cohen with whom he lives tends to think he is mad: 'It was clearly to be understood that Mordecai did not come up to the standard of sanity which was set by Mr Cohen's view of men and things' (*DD*, 339). Of course, this may be more of a judgement on Mr Cohen than on Mordecai. In effect, Deronda has to make a decision about Mordecai even though the signs are ambiguous: is he driven by a good or evil genius? Deronda's doubts are powerfully presented: '[Mordecai] was more poetical than a social reformer with coloured views of the new moral world in parallelogram, or than an enthusiast in sewage; still he came under the same class' (*DD*, 435). His conviction that in Deronda 'he had found a new executive self ... might seem justifiably dismissed as illusory and even preposterous' (*DD*, 435–6).

Deronda in effect has to gamble that Mordecai's proto-Zionism is not merely fanaticism but an authentic form of idealism that could further the greater good of the world: 'Fanaticism was not as common as bankruptcy, but taken in all its aspects it was abundant enough' (*DD*, 435). Mordecai's vision may be on a higher level than that of European colonialists, but there could be no certainty, at the time the novel was written, as to how any Zionist project would turn out. Although 'great' nations such as England or America may have eventually emerged, after much struggle and turmoil, as a consequence of colonization, colonization has just as often had unfortunate outcomes, especially when it has been allied to imperialism.

If a Jewish nation is created and the Jews are winners, there will consequently be losers. For Said, Eliot – like other supporters of the Jewish colonization of Palestine – ignores the losers. Although Eliot is not specific in *Daniel Deronda* about the effect colonization of Palestine by Jews is likely to have on its predominantly Arab inhabitants, Mordecai refers to 'difficulties', and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' reveals the unspoken subtext to his words by acknowledging that any form of colonization will have its price. Yet, as 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' also makes clear, without Jewish colonization of Palestine, for Theophrastus and no doubt for Eliot, there is a great risk of the Jews being the losers. Zionism was to a considerable extent a reaction to rising anti-Semitism in Europe, and if Jews were denied a nation that would allow them to escape it, then it would be the Jews who would lose. Theophrastus goes so far as to argue that without nationhood a distinct Jewish people would eventually disappear: 'Are they destined to complete fusion with the peoples among whom they are dispersed, losing every remnant of a distinctive consciousness as Jews?' (*DD*, 162). Again this makes colonization in a Jewish context different in kind from general European colonialism, as arguably both the Jews who wish to colonize Palestine to escape oppression and discrimination and to preserve their distinctive identity, and the existing Arab inhabitants of Palestine can be seen as potential losers. One is inevitably forced to choose – a recurrent theme in Eliot's fiction – and in this case Eliot's choice is for the Jews, but without Mordecai's certainty about the outcome and with full awareness of the 'difficulties' he tries to dismiss.

Said does not take account of the fact that winning or losing is a recurrent preoccupation in *Daniel Deronda*, creating ethical difficulties both at the level of the personal lives of the characters and at the political level. Deronda becomes a winner when he turns out to have been born a Jew, but this turns both Hans Meyrick and Gwendolen into losers: any hope that Meyrick had of winning Mirah disappears, and Deronda will now desert Gwendolen to pursue the vocation that Mordecai has created for him. In his letter to Deronda in Chapter 52, Meyrick applies an ironic perspective to causality that is relevant both to Deronda's good fortune and to the Zionist project. Meyrick tells Deronda that 'the most judicious opinion going as to the effects of present

causes is that “time will show”, which leads him to refer to ‘the present causes of past effects’ (*DD*, 549). Since one can never be sure of what ‘present causes’ will lead to in the future, causality in relation to the human mind in effect works backwards, being perceived to cause the past rather than the future. After reading Meyrick’s letter we see Deronda reading his own past differently in the light of the revelation of his Jewishness, bearing out Meyrick’s perspective. Conveniently, he can now view Meyrick’s love for Mirah as not real but only as a kind of fantastic game, taking the imaginative pyrotechnics of the letter as a sign of Meyrick’s lack of real feeling, not even considering that this self-display may be a means of covering up the pain of unrequited love. Eliot surely implies irony when Deronda concludes, ‘I can’t say that he is not active in imagining what goes on in other people – but then he always imagines it to fit his own inclination’ (*DD*, 554), as this could easily apply to Deronda himself.

Only a prophet convinced of the truth of his vision can project causality into the future, and as is apparent with Mordecai, this can have value in motivating and shaping human action. No doubt Eliot had little rational expectation that a series of unpredictable events would lead to a Jewish state being created in Palestine, but neither the narrator nor Deronda dismisses prophecy. How can one act to try to improve the world without the hope that prophecy provides? But there is always the risk that there will be losers as well as winners. As a post-colonial critic Said reads history backwards from the point of view of the losers, but I would argue that he distorts both *Daniel Deronda* and Eliot by assuming that they exclude and ignore the perspective of the loser. Indeed I would argue that Eliot is well aware that the ethical must not ignore the fact that judgements or decisions or choices, both in the personal and political spheres, will almost inevitably create losers as well as winners.

Eliot’s presumed indifference to the existing Arab population of Palestine who would be the potential losers if a Jewish state was created through colonization has led Said to associate her with colonialism and its assumption that Europeans have the right to displace non-European peoples: ‘Eliot was indifferent to races who could not be assimilated to European ideas’.<sup>15</sup> But anti-colonialist views that are evident throughout her writing – as in her dramatic poem *The Spanish Gypsy*, which clearly criticizes the Spanish imperialist and exclusivist policy which led to the expulsion of Arabs and Jews from Spain, and her outright condemnation in her letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe of English ‘arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness’ towards ‘all oriental peoples’ (*Letters*, V, 301) – are unmentioned by Said. But perhaps of more significance is that Mordecai takes England and America as models in his concept of a nation. This suggests that the restored Jewish nation is not conceived by him as aiming to be racially or ethnically exclusive but like England and America hybrid in these respects. It may be that Eliot and Said are not too far apart at the level of their ideals, as Said’s was for the creation of a nation in Palestine in which Jews and Arabs could coexist on an equal basis.



Some critics have nevertheless gone much further than Said in their criticism of Eliot and *Daniel Deronda* and claimed that there is an 'insistence on racial essentialism'.<sup>16</sup> 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', however, suggests that Eliot did not see nationality in terms of racial or ethnic exclusiveness but in terms of 'a national consciousness', the Jews being admired for their 'distinctive consciousness ... what we may call the organised memory of national consciousness' (*DD*, 162). Eliot's implied position is that such a consciousness can be created among racially and ethnically diverse people with different sets of beliefs, as in England and America, even though the ideal, of course, may never be fully achieved. The narrator in *Daniel Deronda* is ironic in the 'Hand and Banner' scene about whether there is any longer pure English blood: 'In fact, pure English blood (if leech or lancet can furnish us with the precise product) did not declare itself predominantly in the party at present assembled' (*DD*, 440). The narrator of 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' is critical of English attitudes towards Jews and immigrants, questions the 'exclusiveness' of the Chinese and opposes immigration controls being introduced into England. Even though Mordecai may appear at one point to support Jewish racial separateness, as in his criticism of Jews who marry Gentiles, this is directed at Jews who have internalized Gentile contempt for them and who intermarry in order to be accepted. This is part of his argument that Jews need nationhood so that they can be free from such self-contempt and regain contact and connection with Jewish history, thought and tradition. And even for him it is consciousness rather than race that is fundamental: 'What is it to me that the ten tribes are lost untraceably, or that multitudes of the children of Judah have mixed themselves with the Gentile population as a river with rivers. Behold our people still' (*DD*, 456).

Even though the plot of the novel appears to turn on Deronda being a Jew in a racial sense, his Jewish origins would have meant little or nothing to him if his mind and feelings had not been prepared in advance by his meeting Mirah and Mordecai. Consciousness and choice are more important than race:

If this revelation had been made to me before I knew you both, I think my mind would have rebelled against it. Perhaps I should have felt then – 'If I could have chosen, I would not have been a Jew.' What I feel now is – that my whole being is a consent to the fact. But it has been the gradual accord between your mind and mine which has brought about that full consent. (*DD*, 642)

Various critics have even gone to the extreme of arguing that Eliot's proto-Zionism is a form of anti-Semitism as it is a means of ridding Europe of its Jews: 'In her approval of Deronda's new nationalist awareness, then, was she suggesting that Jews had no real place in the national societies of western Europe? One may easily argue that this was the logic of Daniel's position.'<sup>17</sup> Such a view shows little understanding of Eliot's cultural relativism. It is also clear that Jews such as Gideon and Pash are not attracted by Mordecai's

proto-Zionist vision and appear happy to continue to live in England without denying their Jewishness. In 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' Theophrastus has no expectation that all Jews will support the ideal of Jewish nationhood any more than they did in Biblical times: 'Plenty of prosperous Jews remained behind in Babylon' (*ITS*, 163).

Eliot throughout her writings is suspicious of redemptive and providentialist thinking. Even if one accepts that England and America eventually became 'great' nations, the tone of the narrator in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' indicates that this can provide no compensation for the Britons 'massacred' by Anglo-Saxons or the 'Red Indians' subject to 'extermination' (*ITS*, 146). At the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, though the countryside recovers from the dire effects of the flood – 'Nature repairs her ravages' – the narrator nevertheless points out 'there can be no thorough repair' (*MF*, 521–2). Nor does *Daniel Deronda* offer any guarantee that Mordecai's visionary idealism could not go badly wrong if translated into political action, and many like Said would argue that it has. Even if it succeeded and a 'great' nation that was inclusive eventually emerged that could incorporate the descendants of the unlucky losers, the suffering of the victims of history can never be transcended. This double perspective seems to me intrinsic to *Daniel Deronda*, both at the level of the personal and in terms of the novel's political dimension.

As to whether Eliot would have regretted writing a novel that has had the effect of promoting Zionism in the light of the state of affairs in the Middle East at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is quite possible that she would have. But any kind of action – even writing a novel – carries some risk, as Eliot was well aware; in *Middlemarch* her narrator asks rhetorically: 'Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing?' (*M*, 406). And though it may appear to many that Mordecai has turned out to be an unlucky visionary, Eliot may have agreed with Mao Tse-tung's (or more probably Chou En-lai's) much-cited response when asked about the lessons of the French Revolution, that 'it was far too early to tell'.

## Eliot and Racism: How Should One Read ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’?

Most of the major writers in the Victorian period can be seen as racist to a greater or lesser degree. According to Edward Said, even Marx and Mill are not immune, ‘both of them seemed to have believed that such ideas as liberty, representative government, and individual happiness must not be applied to the Orient for reasons that today we would call racist’.<sup>1</sup> In many of these writers anti-Semitism was the most obvious form of racism and this continued beyond the Victorian period, as is evident even in such figures as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. It used to be thought that the exception to this widespread anti-Semitism and racism in general was George Eliot. Not only did she support Zionism as an ideal and have a deep interest in every aspect of Jewish thought and culture but she was also sympathetic to other groups subject to much prejudice, such as the Gypsies, as is evident in her verse drama *The Spanish Gypsy*, and the Irish. However, a significant number of recent critics have nevertheless linked Eliot with racism, even with anti-Semitism.

Some of that criticism can be seen as lacking credibility, at least if one thinks convincing evidence is important. For example, Sandor Gilman draws extreme conclusions from half a sentence in *Daniel Deronda*: ‘And one man differs from another, as we all differ from the Bosjesman’ (*DD*, 274), claiming that this reference to the Bushmen assumes ‘a polygenetic view of race’,<sup>2</sup> polygenesis being the belief that races have evolved from more than one set of ancestors so that they are seen as belonging to different lineages. Polygenesis was rejected by Darwin, and among its main nineteenth-century proponents were the notorious racists Robert Knox and James Hunt. Eliot’s writings as a whole strongly suggest that she had no sympathy with their views and like Darwin supported monogenesis. However, Gilman’s view has been accepted and taken further by some of Eliot’s post-colonial critics:

[*Daniel Deronda*’s] strongest authorial imputation of a dehumanizing bestiality comes in the off-hand aside that types the Kalahari Bushman as an animalistically undisciplined alien [which] speaks for an emotively entrenched scale of prejudice defined around the stigma of subhumanness.<sup>3</sup>

Gilman goes on to argue that this ‘we’ of Eliot’s effectively establishes an absolute racial divide [in which] blacks occupied an antithetical position to whites [with] Jews, as Gilman concludes, fall[ing] just this side of the human on the ‘scale of humanity’ ... so long as, *Daniel Deronda* seems to say, they conduct themselves ... in a suitably exemplary way ... Hence the clear distinction between two kinds of Jews in the text.<sup>4</sup>

Even the editor of the current Penguin edition of *Daniel Deronda* appears to accept Gilman's claim in his note on the Bushmen reference: 'she does seem to imply an essential difference between "us" and "them".'<sup>5</sup> Since the Bushmen were perceived in the Victorian period as the most ancient people on Earth – hunter-gatherers whose way of life had been unchanged for at least 20,000 years – to suggest that they are different in fundamental ways from readers of *Daniel Deronda*, or even from Europeans in general in the second half of the nineteenth century, hardly need imply polygenesis. Darwin has a few unflattering references to them in *The Descent of Man*, referring to them as 'the lowest existing savages' and as 'the degraded Bushmen of S. Africa', but they are clearly human for him though closest to the 'ancestors of man'.<sup>6</sup> To erect a racist philosophy for Eliot on the basis of a comment that does no more than allude to the fact that there are radical cultural differences between the groups that make up humanity would suggest that an ideological agenda underlies the critical perspective of some of her critics.<sup>7</sup>

An argument that deserves more serious consideration is Edward Said's claim that Eliot is complicit with European colonialism, and therefore with racism, in his essay 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', which I discussed in Chapter 10, where he argues that in supporting Zionism in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot leaves out of account and thus nullifies the existing inhabitants of Palestine. Said does not discuss *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, whose final and longest chapter, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', is more explicitly proto-Zionist than *Daniel Deronda*. For a significant number of post-Said critics it is this essay that most clearly associates Eliot with racism and political conservatism, and they make significant use of it in discussions of *Daniel Deronda* and go much further than Said, claiming that both texts are complicit with racism in its various forms, including anti-Semitism. In this chapter and the next I shall discuss in some detail 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as interpretations of it have been central to the argument that racism and a conservative political agenda are a constitutive part of both Eliot's thinking and writing. A further consideration is whether Eliot's political critics are adequate readers of a writer of highly self-conscious literary texts like Eliot.

'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' has generally been separated off from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* and treated as a text that is primarily significant for providing insight into Eliot's ideas and beliefs. Yet a case can be made for *Impressions* being a work of some literary sophistication. This case has been made most strongly by Nancy Henry who in the introduction to her edition of *Impressions* associates it with 'early Modernist experimentation' and argues that there is no simple and straightforward access to Eliot's views and beliefs since 'the relationship between ancient Theophrastus, modern Theophrastus, and George Eliot'<sup>8</sup> is complex and difficult to disentangle. However, the great majority of commentators on 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' – indeed other chapters of *Impressions* have not been much discussed – have little interest in

it as a literary text and quote passages as if they reflect the views of the author in literal terms, Theophrastus as narrator being seen merely as ‘an enabling mouthpiece for Eliot’s increasingly cantankerous commentary on life’.<sup>9</sup> Even critics who are basically sympathetic to Eliot and have no obvious ideological axe to grind have tended to take this view and are thus troubled by ‘elements that appear almost jingoistic’.<sup>10</sup> I shall argue that ignoring the literary aspects of ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ leads to grossly distorted readings of it and critics’ claim that it directly represents views that can be identified with racism and jingoism have little justification.

The following passage from ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ is often quoted by critics of Eliot in support of the view that she is as subject to racist attitudes as her contemporaries:

Let it be admitted that it is a calamity to the English, as to any other great historic people, to undergo premature fusion with immigrants of alien blood; that its distinctive national characteristics should be in danger of obliteration by the predominating quality of foreign settlers. I do not only admit this, I am ready to unite in groaning over the threatened danger. To one who loves his native language ... it is an affliction as harassing as the climate, that on our stage, in our studios, at our public and private gatherings, in our offices, warehouses, and workshops, we must expect to hear our beloved English with its words clipped, its vowels stretched and twisted ... marred beyond recognition. (*ITS*, 158–9)

According to Marc E. Wohlfarth’s reading of this passage, ‘Like so many of her contemporaries, Eliot is obsessed by the possibility of miscegenation’,<sup>11</sup> and for Bryan Cheyette Eliot was ‘echoing Trollope’s racially degenerate England of *The Way We Live Now* or *The Prime Minister*’.<sup>12</sup> Susan Meyer sees it as part of Eliot’s ‘deeper agenda’, which is to ‘celebrate nationalism’, which Meyer identifies with the promotion of the idea of racial purity, while even Eliot’s proto-Zionism for her is in ‘continuity with an imperialist ideology, a belief in white superiority over dark races, and a certain distaste for the Jews’.<sup>13</sup> Such critics read ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ as if Eliot is speaking in her own voice in order to communicate her ideas directly to a non-specific readership. The effect of this is to set aside such matters as the narrator and his particular characterization, the structure of the essay as a literary artefact and the readership that the narrator believes he is addressing. The element of humour in the passage, as in ‘it is an affliction as harassing as the climate’ – surely intentionally bathetic in its context – is also ignored. The passage is thus divorced from its literary context and interpreted as a simple expression of racist attitudes.

A literary interpretation of ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ should consider why Eliot uses a fictive narrator and explore the relationship between the narrator and the audience he is addressing. It is characteristic of Eliot to keep some distance between her ‘real’ self and her narrators. When she was urged by John Blackwood to expand on the political views implied in *Felix Holt*,

what she produced was the essay, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', published in 1868, in which the persona of Felix Holt, her fictional character, is retained. It may be that a reason she continued to use a pseudonym when there was no longer any need for it was that it created some distance between narrator and author. In *Impressions*, however, this distancing between author and narrator is particularly complex given the witty and learned nature of this text and the clear separation between Eliot and her personalized narrator. Virtually every chapter in *Impressions* is a critical reflection on some aspect of Victorian life or attitudes, and keeping some distance between herself as author and Theophrastus would have been even more important – 'I have a repugnance to anything like an introduction of my own personality to the public' (*Letters*, VI, 280) – especially in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' where the critique of Victorian England and the English is at its most direct. To ignore the relationship between narrator and readership, as critics have generally done, and thus to abstract passages from their context and read them as simple expressions of Eliot's own ideas and opinions is like reading a classic Browning dramatic monologue without considering the interaction between the speaker and whom the speaker is addressing and how this affects the structure of the speaker's argument, the nature of his rhetoric, its persuasive function and the role of the implied author.

A crucial consideration in interpreting the essay is its intended readership. I shall argue that it is specifically addressed to a Victorian readership that the narrator assumes is predominantly anti-Semitic and generally racist, and that the essay is designed not simply to attack in a direct fashion the racism of its readers but to use literary methods to persuade them to change or at least reflect on their attitudes. Mere high principled condemnation of the prejudices of the implied readers would hardly be effective given the deep-seated nature of English prejudice against Jews and would be more likely to be counterproductive. What the narrator does (or more exactly what Eliot makes him do) therefore is to admit that anti-Semitic attitudes and fear of foreigners in general are understandable and that he has some sympathy with their views. This rhetorical strategy places Theophrastus to some degree on the same level as his audience and thus makes him more likely to be listened to and to be persuasive in his critique of both anti-Semitism and hostility to foreigners. One should emphasize that Theophrastus's anti-racism is directly stated on the opening page of the essay where he associates negative views of the Jews with 'the prejudiced, the puerile, the spiteful, and the abysmally ignorant' (*ITS*, 143), but to go on to refer directly to his readers in such terms would surely merely alienate them.

What Eliot's critics see as direct expressions of Eliot's ideas and opinions – as with the passage quoted earlier – can be reinterpreted as Theophrastus attempting to achieve sympathetic contact with his racist audience in order to make that audience more receptive to his general critique of anti-Semitism

and racism in the broader sense. The repeated use of the words 'we', 'us' and 'our' is particularly significant as this exemplifies Theophrastus's strategy of establishing some rapport with the prejudices of his Victorian readers. In marked contrast to Theophrastus's apparently sympathetic understanding of his readers' prejudices, Eliot's personal views on prejudice towards Jews, as expressed in her well-known letter about *Daniel Deronda* to Harriet Beecher Stowe, make it clear that she was outraged by English anti-Semitism, had no sympathy with it and roundly condemns her fellow countrymen:

But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom *we English* come into contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us ... Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called 'educated' making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. (*Letters*, VI, 301, emphasis added)

The tone of this letter is quite different from that of Theophrastus in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' In particular, the 'we' in the phrase 'we English' is in sharp contrast to Theophrastus's use of 'we' as it indicates her shame at being connected with such attitudes on the part of the English. It is likely that Eliot is alluding ironically to Arnold's 'we English, a nation of Indo-European stock'<sup>14</sup> in his discussion of Hebraism and Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy*. Theophrastus's use of 'we', 'us' and 'our' is Arnoldian in tone as this serves his rhetorical purposes, but Eliot in her letter is clearly dissociating herself from Arnold and a questioning of his views is implicit in both *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' Arnold's praise in *Culture and Anarchy* of the 'devout energy'<sup>15</sup> he equates with Hebraism because he associates it with what he sees as the positive aspects of English Puritanism did not lead him to admire or value Jewish civilization and culture as is clear in both *Culture and Anarchy* and *Literature and Dogma*, published four years later in 1873. Indeed Arnold's view of the Jews is close to that of Eliot in her letter of 1848 to John Sibree – 'Everything *specifically* Jewish is of low grade' (*Letters*, I, 247, emphasis in original) – a view which her later writings repudiate.

When Theophrastus discusses the doubts of some liberals as to whether Jews and other migrants can be ever be integrated into English society despite their having been accorded civil rights he again suggests that English fears on this score are understandable, and he uses the conventional language associated with racism in seemingly confirming the *idée reçue* (one still current) that the English are being swamped by foreigners: both Jews and Germanic immigrants

'who have been settling among us for generations ... are still pouring in to settle'; 'Semitic Christians swarm among us'; Greeks 'are objectionally strong in the city'; 'the Scotch are more numerous and prosperous here in the South than is quite for the good of us Southerners' and 'it is felt in high quarters that we have always been too lenient towards [the Irish]' (*ITS*, 158). There is, however, a humorous and ironic undercurrent in this paragraph in the very hyperbolic nature of its language, in references to Scots' cheekbones being 'higher ... than English taste requires' and which 'has not yet been quite neutralised', and to the fact that so many Scots and Irish are employed in the English press, 'thus driving many Englishmen to honest and ineloquent labour'. In taking the language of swamping – as in 'pouring in to settle' and 'swarm among us' – in regard to immigration as literally representing Eliot's views, critics identify her with the racism and jingoism that is being called into question and thus interpret the rhetorical strategy of Theophrastus's seeming empathy with English fears as the real substance of the essay, concluding that it is only, as Meyer puts it, 'ostensibly a defense of the Jews'. What would appear to be the substance – the attack on anti-Semitic and racist attitudes – is thus seen as merely a front for Eliot's English nationalism, which is defined as essentially racist: 'But the essay's deeper agenda is to celebrate nationalism, and it demonstrates the way Eliot's celebration of Jewish nationalism is at heart about English nationalism, about guarding the boundaries of the English nation'.<sup>16</sup>

That the narrator's apparent sympathy with his readers' fears is a device to serve his persuasive purpose is not considered by Eliot's critics. Although Theophrastus recognizes that large numbers of migrants create a problem for a nation's 'sense of corporate existence' (*ITS*, 144), he differs from his implied audience in rejecting the idea that this provides justification for either racist attitudes or for supporting an end to immigration or asylum. To 'spike away the peaceful foreigner, would be a view of international relations not in the long-run favourable to the interests of our fellow-countrymen; for we are at least equal to the races we call obtrusive in the disposition to settle wherever money is to be made and cheaply idle living to be found' (*ITS*, 159–60).

Few commentators consider the structure of the argument in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!'; yet that structure determines the overall context in which the passages that Eliot's critics cite as racist have their meaning and rhetorical effect. The fundamental idea that is being promulgated is that memory is essential to the health both of a nation and of the individual consciousness.<sup>17</sup> The narrator believes his audience would not disagree with that and to persuade it further cites modern examples where the revival of a national consciousness through recovered memory has had beneficial effects, such as the emergence in Europe of a Greek and an Italian nation. In neither case is race mentioned as a factor in this 'reviving nationality' (*ITS*, 143). Indeed in the case of Greece 'the presence of ancient Greece in the consciousness of European men' (*ITS*, 144) was an essential factor even though it was recognized that 'the infiltration of other than



Greek blood' dissociated modern Greece from classical Greece in any racial sense. Indeed Theophrastus claims not have a high opinion of modern Greeks – 'many modern Greeks are highly disreputable characters' – but nevertheless 'the preservation of national memories' on the part of both Europeans and the inhabitants of Greece has been instrumental in creating 'a free modern Greece'.

However, Theophrastus also points out that some concepts of nationality distort or romanticize the past when he discusses the nationalist sentiments of 'one of our living historians' (*ITS*, 144) who asserts forcibly 'our true affinities of blood and language' (*ITS*, 145) with the Anglo-Saxons and who 'virtually says', 'Let the poetic fragments which breathe forth their fierce bravery in battle and their trust in fierce gods who helped them, be treasured with affectionate reverence.' Although Theophrastus thinks the historian is right to stress the need for the English to feel a sense of continuity with their nation's past, he nevertheless reminds his readers that the Anglo-Saxons were pagan invaders and their modern descendants colonized America, in both cases crushing any resistance from the existing population, and have imposed their colonial will on India. Yet though the realities of colonization, ignored by the historian, are recognized by Theophrastus, it is clear he believes that colonization cannot simply be condemned in absolute terms since, as with England and more recently America, it can eventually lead to the emergence of 'great' nations. But though very much more aware of historical complexities than the historian, Theophrastus asserts he 'guides us rightly in urging us to dwell on the virtues of our ancestors with emulation' in order to foster a sense of national identity: 'The eminence, the nobleness of a people, depends on its capability of being stirred by memories, and of striving for what we call spiritual ends – ends which consist not in immediate material possession, but in the satisfaction of a great feeling that animates the collective body as with one soul' (*ITS*, 146). But it is clear that such a collective sense does not depend on race but on consciousness: 'It is this living force of sentiment in common which makes a national consciousness' (*ITS*, 147). The 'nobleness of each individual citizen' as well as the nation 'depends on the presence of this national consciousness' (*ITS*, 146). Eliot's political critics, however, tend to ignore the following key sentence: 'we should recognise a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in *every other people*, and understand that its absence is a privation of the greatest good' (*ITS*, 147, emphasis added). Thus nationality as a concept is associated with cultural relativism and dissociated from racism, which by definition regards some races or peoples as intrinsically inferior to others.

Theophrastus's view of the Jews should be seen in this context, and again the argument is complex and needs careful interpretation. He recognizes that the Jews have long been considered as 'altogether exceptional' (*ITS*, 148) but denies that this makes them quite other than the rest of humanity. To take otherness too far has dangers for it can overemphasize exceptionality so that the Jews are either idealized by those who are pro-Jewish or despised or victimized by

those who are anti-Jewish, but for Theophrastus Jewish exceptionalism is only a matter of degree and not a difference in kind from other peoples: 'Every nation of forcible character ... is so far exceptional' (*ITS*, 148). For Eliot the Jews may have 'a sense of separateness unique in its intensity' (*ITS*, 149), but this does not cut them off completely from other nationalities and from a shared humanity. The Jews' 'likeness' to other nationalities is stressed by Theophrastus, and it serves his particular persuasive purposes to focus on similarities to the English: the 'affinities of disposition between our own race and the Jews' (*ITS*, 150). It is clear, however, that 'race' is not being used in the sense that implies genetic or biological difference; its primary meaning is a people with a distinctive history, culture and tradition. The English in any case are not now a distinct race in the narrow sense; the origins of England may lie in Anglo-Saxon invasion and colonization, but further invasions from the Vikings, the Normans as well as the continual immigration that Theophrastus himself refers to from Scotland and Ireland, the continent of Europe and beyond, have made the English a hybrid people. Nor are modern Jews as distinct a race as the Jews who lived in Palestine at the time of the Roman conquest; the diaspora has inevitably led to mingling with other peoples, as even Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* recognizes. But unlike the English and other peoples, the dispersed Jews have no country to provide any centre or grounding for a 'sense of corporate existence' so that in order to preserve and maintain it Zealots emerged who 'advocated resistance to the death against the submergence of their nationality' (*ITS*, 149), thus fostering some unattractive Jewish traits (shared, however, by the Puritans, home-grown English zealots) such as arrogance and a sense of superiority, which did not endear them to the people among whom they lived and worsened their persecution.

Of course, it has often been pointed out that anti-Semitism is contradictory in that the Jews are blamed both for maintaining their Jewish religion and culture and thus being a separate group within society, and also for being rootless cosmopolitans, individualistic, free-thinking, unconnected with religion or tradition. The latter is the basis, for example, of T. S. Eliot's notoriously negative comments on Jews – 'reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable'<sup>18</sup> – though ironically he also criticized George Eliot along similar lines for what he branded as 'heresy', an individualistic rationalism that devalues tradition and orthodoxy.<sup>19</sup> A stock view of her as a standard Victorian rationalist underlies T. S. Eliot's view. But like him, she not only valued religion and tradition but also had doubts about cosmopolitanism when taken to an extreme, which she also associated with Jews though, in contrast to him, she makes it clear that it applies not only to Jews.

It is suggested, however, in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* that identifying Jews with a uniquely rootless cosmopolitanism is a form of anti-Semitism, though Theophrastus recognizes that cosmopolitanism does have application to certain Jews: 'Their monetary hold on governments is tending

to perpetuate in leading Jews a spirit of universal alienism (euphemistically called cosmopolitanism), even where the West has given them a full share in civil and political rights' (*ITS*, 157). However, Theophrastus also suggests that cosmopolitanism is being exploited for dubious ends since it is ideologically attractive to Western colonialism and global capitalism as it can be used to justify economic exploitation of countries such as China, 'destroying or plundering the fruits of his [the Chinaman's] labour on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough' (*ITS*, 147). The cosmopolitan mentality is thus seen as partly a product of imperialism and colonialism as the dominant ideologies in the West in the later nineteenth century. It is not unique to Jews but certain Jews because of a history that has subjected them to alienation may be well adapted to it.

Just as the Jews who adhere to their religion and traditions are exceptional in their intense sense of themselves as a distinctive people, those Jews who reject nationality and religion in favour of an individualistic or materialist philosophy are also exceptional, as one sees in *Daniel Deronda* in the characterizations of Deronda's mother and Mirah's and Mordecai's father Lapidoth. But the alienation and cosmopolitanism of such Jews are not different in kind from that which can affect alienated non-Jews. There's an obvious relationship between Deronda's mother and the non-Jewish Armgart, the eponymous heroine of Eliot's verse drama written in 1870–1. Also Lapidoth is related to such calculating non-Jewish egotists and gamblers as Christian in *Felix Holt* and, especially, Tito Melema in *Romola*, a Greek though not born in Greece, probably the most extreme example of an alienated consciousness in her work, described by Bernardo as 'one of the *demoni*, who are of no particular country ... His mind is a little too nimble to be weighted with all the stuff we men carry about in our hearts' (*R*, 252). It is significant, however, that in Chapter 1 of *Romola*, when Bratti first meets Tito, he asks him if he is 'a Hebrew'. Imagery associated with Darwinism, such as adaptation and exploiting chance, is used in connection with these characters.<sup>20</sup> With individualistic Jews like Lapidoth alienation can be particularly severe because, like Tito, they do not have a country that at least provides a minimal connection with a particular place; as Theophrastus puts it, individualistic Jews are 'capable of being everywhere acclimatised' (*ITS*, 157).

The Jews as represented in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' thus present a double lesson to a nation such as the English, one positive – through their heightened sense of Jewish identity despite having no country in a material sense – and one negative, the dangers of alienation. Alienation, however, is not always or not necessarily negative for Eliot, either for Jews or non-Jews, if it promotes an intellectual disinterestedness that is not motivated by egotism or devoid of idealism. In *Daniel Deronda* an artist like Klesmer can direct it positively into music so that it becomes a kind of equivalent to a sense of nationality, though he has little interest in race or nationhood, marrying an

English woman and uncommitted to any one country. He is an example of a more positive cosmopolitanism, being 'a felicitous combination of the German, the Slave, and the Semite' (*DD*, 37). According to Catherine Arrowpoint, he has 'cosmopolitan ideas' and 'looks forward to the fusion of races' (*DD*, 206). Eliot also depicts Jews who are in between the extremes of zealotry for nationhood or a distinctive Jewish identity and alienation, whether positive or negative, such as Gideon and Pash who accept their Jewishness but are content to live in a country like England, and working or lower middle-class Jews like the Cohens.

Eliot's representation of the latter and the references to Jews in specific terms in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' have, however, led to accusations that Eliot succumbs to conventional Victorian anti-Semitism. Though the Cohens have been seen as embodying anti-Semitic stereotypes – '[*Daniel Deronda*] distorts Jewish characters into stereotypical incarnations of greed'<sup>21</sup> – it is doubtful whether they are any more 'stereotypical' than Eliot's working-class characters. It has to be admitted that Eliot's aesthetic is problematic for those who look to literature for positive representations of oppressed groups. The rationale for her realist aesthetic is spelled out in her critique of Dickens in her essay, 'The Natural History of German Life', in which she accuses him of 'encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of *altruism*, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself'.<sup>22</sup> As a novelist with a strong sociological awareness, for her people are not merely individual but share characteristics and attributes – shaped by cultural and social factors – that allow them to have a group as well as an individual identity. This emphasis on the social and cultural is fundamental to Eliot's aesthetic, and it informs her representation of disadvantaged social groups. To represent the working-class or lower class Jews – the latter having to try to make a living among people who have persecuted and despised them for centuries – without taking account of the negative consequences of that would be contrary to Eliot's realist aesthetic. Theophrastus points to the role of cultural pressures – especially living 'under the shadow of oppression' (*ITS*, 153) – in 'insisting that Jews are *made* viciously cosmopolitan by holding the world's money-bag' (*ITS*, 155, emphasis added), and goes on: 'Unquestionably the Jews, having been more than any other race exposed to the adverse moral influences of alienism, must, both in individuals and in groups, have suffered some corresponding moral degradation' (*ITS*, 156), but the Jews may have the advantage over the working class, since the negative effects of being 'an expatriated, denationalised race, used for ages to live among antipathetic populations' may be less than would be 'the case of a people who had neither their adhesion to a separate religion founded on historic memories, nor their characteristic family affectionateness' (*ITS*, 155–6), the latter a feature of the Cohens in *Daniel Deronda*.

It would hardly be surprising if traces of class snobbery may inform Eliot's representation of the working-class and lower class Jews since she is a Victorian middle-class intellectual writing about people whom she observes from the outside rather than knowing on a more intuitive level from within. Nevertheless attacks of the kind mentioned above can easily be directed back at her political critics. Are they not in effect objecting on ideological grounds to Eliot's aesthetic? Anything that could be construed as commenting critically or not sufficiently positively on any socially disadvantaged group is identified with stereotyping. The more sociologically minded Eliot sees one of fiction's social roles as being to focus on the social and cultural conditions that create the 'corresponding moral degradation' that she sees as an inevitable consequence of disadvantage. As she implies in her discussion of Dickens, if people subject to dehumanizing living conditions possess refined taste, are governed by altruism, then poverty, social oppression, lack of education could be seen as positively beneficial.

Although the Jews may be a lesson to the English of the spiritual benefit of preserving a national consciousness, the English have the advantage of a country that can potentially ground nationality, but Theophrastus's argument and the basis of his proto-Zionism is that without a country a distinctive Jewish culture will eventually be eroded, with Jews losing 'that separateness which is made their reproach' (*ITS*, 155), so that 'they may be in danger of lapsing into a cosmopolitan indifference equivalent to cynicism, and of missing that inward identification with the nationality immediately around them which might make some amends for their inherited privation'. It is this fear that leads Theophrastus to urge his English audience – after emphasizing the triviality of much English prejudice against immigrants in general and the Jews in particular ('having known a Mr Jacobson who was very unpleasant') (*ITS*, 161) – to consider the question as to whether there are 'the conditions present or approaching for the restoration of a Jewish state planted on the old ground as a centre of national feeling' (*ITS*, 162–3). There is no suggestion, despite the claims of some of Eliot's critics, that all Jews would and should embrace this project any more than one would expect all 'migratory Englishmen' to forsake 'their voluntary dispersion' (*ITS*, 156) and to return to England, yet who benefit from 'the consciousness of having a native country, the birthplace of common memories and habits of mind' (*ITS*, 156).

But, of course, what troubles many recent Eliot critics is that this entails colonizing Palestine, thus leading to accusations that Eliot's 'proto-Zionist impulse'<sup>23</sup> supports colonialism and imperialism, and consequently racism. But 'The Modern! Hep! Hep! Hep!', as I have already argued, makes it clear that colonization can neither be justified nor condemned in simple terms. Conflict between colonizers and existing inhabitants is almost an inevitability, and it may lead to war or even genocide; yet colonization may still produce nations that eventually promote the greater good of humanity. For Theophrastus and

implicitly for Eliot, if the only way of safeguarding the Jews' distinctive identity and culture, which would otherwise be lost over time, is for Jews settled in Europe and beyond to seek to colonize the land from which they were originally driven out, then the founding of a Jewish state must be supported, and the essay attempts to persuade its readers to take the same view. But both *Daniel Deronda*, in the discussion in the tavern in Chapter 42, and 'The Modern! Hep! Hep! Hep!' make it clear that this is an issue on which there are different views, many people, both Jews and non-Jews, supporting assimilation. Despite her last two works being politically committed to a proto-Zionist position, there is still a dialogic dimension.

It has not been my aim to deny that 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' is a highly political text or to claim that as a literary text it transcends the political, but to argue that in ignoring its literary aspects political critics create a caricature of Eliot as a believer in and promoter of imperialism and colonialism, a jingoistic and racist English nationalist, even an anti-Semite despite her support for Jewish nationhood. This shows the dire effect of reading a literary text as if it is a straightforward presentation of political ideas and arguments. Of course, literary texts emerge from and continue to be read in political contexts, and their writers cannot help but have views – explicit or implicit – on political issues like imperialism, racism, nationalism, democracy, but for critics to think that they can have direct access to those views without the mediation of the text's literary language and structure playing any significant role is to deny the relevance of the literary to the consideration and discussion of cultural issues. One may disagree with Eliot's views in the abstract on political questions such as colonization, cosmopolitanism, the working class, Jewish nationhood, the need for nations to have a sense of corporate identity, but on all of these issues the literary context through which these views are mediated brings into play contrary arguments, ambiguities, moral dilemmas, the impossibility of dissociating political ideas from rhetoric, which challenge simplistic judgements of her and her work.

## Eliot and Derrida: An Elective Affinity?\*

### I

As this study has suggested, George Eliot has been a problematic writer for modern criticism. Critics with quite disparate perspectives – such as New Critics, Marxists, post-structuralists, feminists and post-colonial critics – have seen her fiction as incoherent or contradictory in various respects. Terry Eagleton in his most obviously Marxist phase saw numerous ideological contradictions in her work, with *Middlemarch* being subject to an ‘ethical reduction of history’ through the “‘solution” of self sacrifice’ which is ‘ideologically insufficient’, while *Daniel Deronda* ‘is driven to the desperate recourse of adopting a mystical epistemology to resolve its problems’.<sup>1</sup> Post-structuralist-influenced critics such as Colin MacCabe and Catherine Belsey have equated Eliot’s fiction with the ‘classic realist text’ in which narration problematically operates as a metalanguage which ‘refuses to acknowledge its own status as writing’, so that ‘the narration functions simply as a window on reality’.<sup>2</sup> Many feminist critics have seen a contradiction between her self-realization as both writer and woman and the fact that her major female characters are either tragic figures or have to settle for limited lives, which leads Elaine Showalter to refer to ‘the pattern of self-sacrificing masochism in Eliot’.<sup>3</sup> In the last few decades, as discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, the most negative commentary has come from post-colonial critics who have mounted a particularly severe attack, claiming that – despite Eliot’s links with liberal and progressive ideas – in her final two works there is complicity with imperialism, colonialism and even racism. Though I have argued that such critiques are very much open to question, the extent of negative criticism and the recurrent accusation of contradiction suggest that the mental attitude or orientation that propels her writing is one that critics from various schools have had difficulty coming to terms with or even comprehending so that her work has been judged in accordance with criteria that her writing may destabilize from the start. In this chapter I shall consider why critics have tended not to grasp Eliot’s mode of thinking and consequently her writing, particularly its political and ethical aspects.

One modern critical school, however, has tended to adopt a more positive point of view in regard to Eliot’s work. During the heyday of deconstruction, *Middlemarch* in particular was seen as having proto-Derridean aspects,<sup>4</sup> but that has done little to undermine the criticism directed at her and her work by post-colonialists, Marxists and feminists. I shall argue, however, that the

accusations of contradiction that characterizes much of the negative criticism of her work can be countered by exploring further the connections between her mode of thinking and that of Jacques Derrida, especially her links with the later Derrida in which the main emphasis is on rethinking the political and the ethical, and argue that recognizing a proto-Derridean dimension in her writing calls into question especially accusations of complicity with imperialism or colonialism and social conservatism in general.

A general link between Eliot and Derrida is that though both have strong connections with a tradition of Enlightenment thought, they distance themselves from it in significant respects. Eliot furthered rationalist critique of religion and metaphysics generally through her translations of Strauss and Feuerbach, but perhaps her strongest intellectual sympathy was with Spinoza – also translated by her though her translations were not published in her lifetime – whose relationship to the Enlightenment is complex as is acknowledged in his being seen as part of the ‘radical Enlightenment’.<sup>5</sup> Although she strongly supported science and rational inquiry in her essays and had no doubts about the validity of Darwin’s theory of natural selection in scientific terms, she refused to condemn or attack religion. Her scathing critique of Dr Cumming’s form of religion in her essay of 1855, ‘Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming’, was partly because ‘[t]here is not the slightest leaning towards mysticism in his Christianity’,<sup>6</sup> and similarly with her response to Darwin: ‘to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that underlies the processes’ (*Letters*, III, 227). Some critics have thought that this apparent lack of enthusiasm indicates doubts about the theory, wrongly I think, but it could be argued that this view of her remark suggests dismay among certain of her critics that she is less strongly committed to scientific rationalism than they think she should be.

Derrida, likewise, has strong connections with an Enlightenment tradition of thought, and Christopher Norris in particular has emphasized this in various discussions of his work in which he attacks attempts to equate Derrida’s earlier writing with postmodern scepticism. But even Norris has to acknowledge the difficulties of maintaining Derrida’s Enlightenment credentials. The essay ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy’, Norris found particularly problematic, admitting that it was ‘extremely resistant to ... my kind of reading’,<sup>7</sup> whereas John D. Caputo, a critic much more favourably disposed to Derrida’s later writings, welcomes it and sees it as ‘a provocative delimitation of his relationship to the Enlightenment, an unsettling settling of accounts with modernity’.<sup>8</sup> *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ are somewhat equivalent to Derrida’s essay for Eliot’s critics, since these texts apparently flirt with mystical and apocalyptic ideas that seem to break with her earlier thinking and writing.

The radical viewpoint of post-colonial and other political critics of Eliot who have criticized *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ tends



to be grounded in Enlightenment rationalism and values such as equality and social emancipation: 'For a writer who might be expected to support a more rationalist version of religion ... *Daniel Deronda's* mystical Judaism is an anomaly.'<sup>9</sup> 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' has been particularly associated with reactionary conservatism, one critic referring to 'her embrace of nationalism, racialism and patriarchy' and claiming that 'she settles in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" on the argument that preservation of racial separateness ... is the goal to be pursued'.<sup>10</sup> Another commentator asserts that the essay is 'virtually a compendium of the nineteenth-century conservative politics of inheritance and tradition'.<sup>11</sup> Derrida responded to Habermas's accusations that he was indifferent to such Enlightenment ideals as reason and emancipation – for example, reducing logic to rhetoric<sup>12</sup> – by claiming that such views arose out of a failure to read him adequately. I shall argue that a failure to read Eliot adequately has led to her being unpersuasively branded as a right-wing and anti-Enlightenment thinker.

Eliot's political critics tend to apply a logic of 'either/or' in their judgements of her position on such issues as colonialism and imperialism. As with Derrida, I shall suggest that her thinking is non-oppositional and so does not operate in terms of a logic of 'either/or', with the result that forms of thinking founded upon 'either/or' are destabilized in her writing. Derrida's break with such a logic has been seen as the starting point of his 'deconstruction' of 'Western metaphysics' in his critique of Husserl's phenomenology and its foundational concept that there is a basic opposition in speech between 'indications' and 'expressions'. For Derrida 'indications' and 'expressions' cannot be kept separate from each other as categories, and his work as a whole aims not only to show that all such fundamental oppositions can be deconstructed but also that political or philosophical positions based on them will tend to have a problematic outcome for both sides: 'In philosophy as elsewhere, Eurocentrism *and* anti-Eurocentrism are symptoms of a missionary, colonial culture.'<sup>13</sup> A Derridean concept related to the destabilization of the logic of 'either/or' is 'undecidability', and I shall suggest that this can be usefully employed in discussing Eliot's mode of thought, especially in relation to political and ethical issues.

Though 'undecidability' is a major feature of Derrida's writing from the start, as it emerges from his continual undermining of dualisms, in his later work it is strongly focused on the problem of decision-making in itself. This change of emphasis reflects the influence of Kierkegaard and his idea of the 'leap of faith', which Derrida discusses at length in *The Gift of Death*. As Derrida repeatedly argues, 'undecidability' is not being unable to decide but having to decide in a context in which there are considerations which cannot be resolved in any simple sense. If there were no undecidability and choice was utterly clear cut there would be no need for decisions since decision-making would merely be mechanically generated. Also one cannot know for sure the

consequences of making a decision; yet consequences cannot be left out of account in judging the rightness of decisions, and to be human is continually to be confronted by undecidability and the need to decide. No decision can be completely grounded in rationality, and one can never be sure that any decision one takes will be the right one.<sup>14</sup>

Eliot's political critics align her with imperialism and colonialism even though she distances herself from these at certain points in her writing, but her critics either ignore this or see her thought as merely confused or self-contradictory. A significant difference between her and her political critics is that while they tend to see colonialism and colonization as interchangeable or aspects of the same thing, in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' they are not identified with each other, despite their obvious affinity. Whereas colonialism in the modern era is treated in negative terms by her, there is no such clear-cut judgement in relation to colonization as such. Yet the text makes it clear that colonization, like colonialism, almost invariably involves conflict with existing inhabitants. It is explicitly stated that colonization has certainly led to the replacement of peoples, even to genocide. As well as referring to Britons being 'massacred' by invading Anglo-Saxon colonizers, Theophrastus also points out that the descendants of these Anglo-Saxon colonizers, the new British, were 'able, if [they] liked, to exterminate' (*ITS*, 146) the 'Red Indians' in the colonization of America. The language would appear to indicate that colonization is beyond any moral justification; yet this seems to be in contradiction with Theophrastus's later claim that the English, descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, have become a 'great historic people' (*ITS*, 158). But what for Eliot's critics looks like contradiction is for her an *aporia*. Whereas for Eliot's political critics it is taken for granted that with both colonialism and colonization there is a fundamental division in categorial terms between the 'indigenous' or 'native' people and the colonizers, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' suggests there can be no absolute distinction between colonizers and colonized. Underlying Eliot's view of colonization is the idea that there are no completely 'indigenous' or 'native' peoples (possibly the Bushmen, mentioned in *Daniel Deronda*, may be the closest) since virtually all human beings on earth are descended from migrating peoples or ex-colonizers.<sup>15</sup> This is clear when Theophrastus points out that the Israelites who journeyed to the promised land of Canaan were colonizers and not different fundamentally from the Anglo-Saxons in that respect: 'There is more likeness than contrast between the way we English got our island and the way the Israelites got Canaan' (*ITS*, 150). In other words colonization goes all the way down, and colonizers can eventually become accepted and perceived as 'indigenous' or 'native' peoples. This problematizes any judgement on colonization.

The 'both/and' nature of Eliot's thinking is apparent in the view expressed by Theophrastus that the existing inhabitants of a country (in the case of England the descendants of invaders who drove out and displaced the previous

inhabitants) have the right to identify with the country their ancestors colonized and defend it against new invaders or new colonizers:

A people having the seed of worthiness in it must feel an answering thrill when it is adjured by the deaths of its heroes who died to preserve its national existence ... Nations so moved will resist conquest with the very breasts of their women, will pay their millions and their blood to abolish slavery, will share privation in famine and all calamity. (*ITS*, 146–7)

No doubt post-colonial critics might argue that there is an implication here that not all peoples have the right to resist invasion, only those having ‘the seed of worthiness’. One has to remember, as discussed in Chapter 11, that Theophrastus should not be identified with Eliot and is using language rhetorically as a means of persuading his Victorian readership to his point of view, but there is little evidence from Eliot’s writing as a whole that she viewed certain peoples as intrinsically inferior and thus having no right to resist colonization. Cultural relativism ran deep in her. Her verse drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*, sympathizes both with the Gypsies’ aspiration to nationhood and with their resistance to Spanish imperialism. Theophrastus later links prejudice against the Irish and black people with prejudice against Jews and feels shamed by English advertisements stating ‘No Irish need apply’ (*ITS*, 155). In *Daniel Deronda*, Deronda himself in discussing the revival of nations looks forward to ‘a great outburst of force in the Arabs, who are inspired with a new zeal’ (*DD*, 448).

Yet at the same time as supporting in regard to England the ‘fiery resolve to resist invasion’ even if only with ‘an improvised array of pitchforks’ (*ITS*, 160), Theophrastus advocates the restoration of a Jewish state in Palestine, which will clearly entail colonization and at the very least some displacement of the existing Arab inhabitants of Palestine. One of the major lines of attack on Eliot by her political critics has been that she ignored the Arab population of Palestine in her proto-Zionist support for a Jewish nation, but it is simplistic to draw the conclusion that because there is no explicit discussion of the existing inhabitants of Palestine in either *Daniel Deronda* or ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ that Eliot would have believed that Palestine was ‘an empty territory’ or had ‘total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of the East, Palestine in particular’, as Said has argued.<sup>16</sup> Theophrastus’s references to the Anglo-Saxon invasion of England and to British colonization of America show that Eliot is all too aware that colonization almost inevitably leads to conflict. Eliot’s logic of ‘both/and’ implies that just as the modern British ought to resist invaders or colonizers, so the ancient Britons were justified in their resistance to the Anglo-Saxons and the ‘Red Indians’ likewise in opposing European colonization. Thus by extension the existing population of Palestine would have the moral right to resist modern Jewish colonizers. For Eliot an ethically absolute position on colonization is impossible. Migration and colonization

are facts of history, and existing peoples have been eliminated, driven out, subjugated and new nations formed in a continual cycle. Colonization is an undecidable issue if viewed in the abstract with historical distance, and there may be no necessity to decide in favour of either colonized or colonizers: one can both sympathize with the invaded ancient Britons and also accept that a 'great' English nation eventually emerged. But in terms of colonization in the modern world, the logic of 'both/and' will create undecidability in the Derridean sense of having to take a decision with no assurance that it will be the right one, as in Palestine where there is a conflict of interests between the existing majority Arab population and the claims of Jews who can have a nation of their own only by colonizing the land of their ancestors. Derrida has called such an experience of the undecidable 'a terrible and tragic situation in which to find oneself'.<sup>17</sup> Eliot's political critics, however, ignore undecidability and see Eliot's support for colonization of Palestine by European Jews as expressed in *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as evidence merely of an imperialist and racist ideology on her part.<sup>18</sup>

Eliot's lack of sympathy with imperialism and colonialism is shown in the following comment by Theophrastus: 'That any people at once distinct and coherent enough to form a state should be held in subjection by an alien antipathetic government has been becoming more and more a ground of sympathetic indignation' (*ITS*, 160). Colonialism, of course, may entail colonization to varying degrees, but the difference between the two is that in colonialism the colonialist state remains the centre and its aim is to exploit the subjugated country for the economic benefit of the dominating country, whereas colonization involves large numbers of people settling permanently in another country because for various reasons – such as religious persecution or poverty – they decide to leave the land they were born in. America illustrates the distinction: it was a British colonial possession and also initially colonized predominantly by the British, many of whom were antagonistic to Britain and had left to start a new life in America, never intending to return to Britain. Eventually, of course, these colonists rebelled against the colonial power and created their own nation. Clearly the relationship between Britain and India was fundamentally different: India could not be colonized by British immigrants in the way that America was, and in any case few of the British who went to India intended to settle permanently there. Eliot's opposition to British colonialism in India, even to the extent of sympathizing with the Indian Mutiny, is clear from Theophrastus's ironic comments on British colonial policy there:

The Hindoos also have doubtless had their rancours against us and still entertain enough ill-will to make unfavourable remarks on our character, especially as to our historic rapacity and arrogant notions of our own superiority; they perhaps do not admire the usual English profile, and they are not converted to our way of feeding; but though we are a small number of an alien race profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people, they are unable to turn us out;

at least, when they tried we showed them their mistake. We do not call ourselves a dispersed and a punished people: we are a colonising people, and it is we who have punished others. (*ITS*, 146)

Theophrastus is equally hostile to British imperialist policy in China, especially in regard to the opium trade. Though one's own country and its culture should be at the centre of one's feelings, this does not justify exploiting the Chinese or seeing them as inferior: 'I am not bound to demoralise him [the Chinaman] with opium ... [or] to insult him for his want of my tailoring and religion when he appears as a peaceable visitor on the London pavement' (*ITS*, 147).

Eliot's critics do not take sufficient account of the distinction she sees between modern colonialism and colonization. Given that colonization is undecidable there is not an intrinsic contradiction between Deronda's hailing of America as a 'great'<sup>19</sup> new nation – the product of colonization – and Theophrastus's acknowledgement of the cost for the displaced 'Red Indian' people. Though in favour of Jewish colonization of land occupied mainly by Arabs in Palestine, Eliot's support is dependent on such colonization being distinct from colonialism. In the last sentence of the quotation on British colonial policy in India, a contrast is created between 'a colonising people', such as the British, and 'a dispersed and punished people', and clearly the latter description applies most obviously to the Jews. Though at the time she was writing *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus* Such colonialism and imperialism had become political ideologies and it was difficult to see colonization as existing independently of them as one can argue that it did in earlier eras, the Jews were for her a special case, having an ancestral connection with Palestine and subject to oppression in varying degrees in the countries in which they have settled. Apart from the Jewish situation in relation to Palestine there is no sign of support for colonization in general in the modern world in Eliot's writing.<sup>20</sup> Yet being aware of what colonization may entail, and knowing there can be no certainty as to the consequences, Eliot in advocating Jewish nationhood through colonization will necessarily encounter Derrida's claim that having to decide is 'a terrible and tragic situation in which to find oneself'.

Theophrastus, however, urges his readers to consider the question as to whether conditions may be right for restoring Jewish nationhood in Palestine. Although it could be argued that Palestine was not a 'nation' – being a colony of the Ottoman Empire – at least as conventionally understood, any more than America or pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain were nations before colonization, this would not have provided justification for colonization for Eliot since her view of what constitutes a nation is not sovereignty or shared racial origins but the 'living force of sentiment in common which makes a national consciousness' (*ITS*, 147). Since those who are threatened with colonization are justified in resisting, this must apply as much to the inhabitants of Palestine as to the ancient Britons or the 'Red Indians', for the 'both/and' logic of Eliot's position in relation to colonization is that though her choice is the Jews, she cannot

deny the Arab inhabitants of Palestine the right to resist, though to articulate that directly in an essay aimed at winning support from English readers for a Jewish nation in Palestine would almost certainly have led to incomprehension on the part of such readers. It is not surprising therefore that there is no explicit mention of the existing Arab population, but I would argue that it is not absent but implicitly present.

Though it is clear from both *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' that Eliot decides to support the Jews, there is some indication of the difficulties of such a decision when Theophrastus alludes to the need to seek some compromise between contrary positions if possible when he refers to the problem of 'opposite claims' which creates the 'human task' of their 'discerning and adjustment' (*ITS*, 160–1). But the root of decision for Eliot in this context of undecidability is that though the majority Arab inhabitants of Palestine may be the likely losers if a Jewish nation is created, without their own state the Jews would be likely losers, and it is inevitable that there will be losers in history. Of course, much of the political criticism directed at Eliot is based on the apparently never-ending conflict in the Middle East as a result of the founding of the state of Israel, though it can be argued that it is absurd to suggest that Eliot should have foreseen such a situation, as this would imply that she should also have foreseen the myriad events that have contributed to the present-day impasse in Palestine. But in deciding to support proto-Zionism in her writing Eliot would surely have been aware she was taking a risk, since the effects of decisions and the actions they lead to are unforeseeable. As Mr Irwine in *Adam Bede* remarks, 'the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it' (*AB*, 422).

Derrida himself also seems to have seen Zionism as an undecidable issue that nevertheless requires that one decide. His own position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been attacked as incoherent and inconsistent. Though he expressed support for Palestinian resistance to Israel he also supported Israel's right to be recognized as a nation: '[its] existence, it goes without saying, must henceforth be recognised by all.'<sup>21</sup> Yet Israel was created by European Jews colonizing Palestine, and Derrida's opposition in principle to colonialism in general is apparent throughout his writing on political questions. Whereas Eliot supported a Jewish state before the event, Derrida supports it after the event. However, one should recognize the difference between these positions. If Derrida had been in Eliot's position in the 1870s, in that context he may have decided against proto-Zionism like those Jews in Chapter 42 of *Daniel Deronda* who reject Mordecai's ideal of Jewish nationhood in favour of assimilation. In the 1870s Eliot had to decide on the issue but with no certainty as to whether her decision would turn out to be justifiable, and would she have changed her mind if she could have foreseen the future? But once a Jewish state had been created the situation of course changes. Although Derrida

was critical of Israeli policies, it seems clear that supporting the dissolution of Israel as a nation, despite the fact that European colonization was central to its creation, was for him untenable. Eliot likewise accepted the right of England and America to exist as nations even though they were the product of colonizations that involved at the extreme massacre and extermination of the existing inhabitants. As I have argued there is no intrinsic contradiction in either Eliot's or Derrida's positions on Jewish nationhood given their anti-dualistic thinking, but for critics committed to a logic of 'either/or' they are inevitably open to accusations of inconsistency and incoherence.

## II

Despite the affinities that exist between Eliot and Derrida in relation to their political thinking, it could be argued that a major difference between the two is that whereas Eliot favours the idea of nationality and believes in the value of a people sharing memories and traditions, Derrida is antagonistic towards nationalism and distrusts the term 'community', which for him tends to exclude or offer little place for the 'other'. Eliot may appear to have stronger links with Heidegger's concept of *Versammlung* or gathering, which Derrida has been critical of. Yet 'both/and' again comes into play as Derrida admits that 'gathering' cannot be wholly discarded:

I think we do not have to choose between unity and multiplicity ... What disrupts the totality is the condition for the relation to the other ... Of course, we need unity, some gathering, some configuration ... What interests me is the limit of every attempt to totalize, to gather, *versammeln* ... the limit of this unifying, uniting movement, the limit that it had to encounter, because the relationship of the unity to itself implies some difference.<sup>22</sup>

John D. Caputo, perhaps the leading commentator on the later Derrida, writes,

Derrida does not renounce the idea of cultural identity – one is French or American, speaks a particular language, has a certain citizenship, operates within certain cultural practices – but wants such identity to be internally differentiated, so that it is *not* identical with oneself, so marked by a 'difference with itself' that the very idea of 'we' is destabilized... 'We' all require 'culture', but let us cultivate (*colere*) a culture of self-differentiation, of differing with itself, where 'identity' is an effect of difference, rather than cultivating 'colonies' (also from *colere*) of the same in a culture of identity which gathers itself to itself in common defense against the other.<sup>23</sup>

Eliot's concept of nationality can be seen as similarly 'internally differentiated'. 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' makes it clear that the English nation is made up of diverse elements, having been subject to several invasions and colonizations as well as continually absorbing immigrants. Although Deronda acquires

Jewish identity, he claims that Englishness and Christianity will remain part of him, as he tells Mordecai: 'Don't ask me to deny my spiritual parentage' (*DD*, 643). The Jews also, despite the general assumption of non-Jews that they have a uniform racial identity, have the most differentiated identity of any people since they are dispersed over the world and have inevitably incorporated elements, both racial and cultural, of the nations within which they have lived. Yet those Jews who respect their religion, culture and traditions have resisted the destabilizing effects of assimilation or cosmopolitanism. Thus they are a lesson both to little Englanders who see Englishness in terms of a uniform identity and to those English who resort to 'debasement of the moral currency' through mockery and ridicule, discussed in the essay of the same name in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*.

'Hospitality' is a key concept in the social and political thinking of both Eliot and the later Derrida, and it is integral to Derrida's concept of 'justice' and the 'gift'. It underlies Eliot's concept of a nation's responsibility towards immigrants or those seeking a haven from persecution. Theophrastus declares, 'Are we to tear the glorious flag of hospitality which has made our freedom the world-wide blessing of the oppressed?' (*ITS*, 159). For both, hospitality does not mean equality between the host and the guest since the condition of being a host entails both difference between them and the host retaining control. But Derrida argues, in contrast to Kant, that hospitality is ideally 'unconditional': it 'implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back ... you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation ... The other, like the Messiah, must arrive whenever he or she wants. She may not even arrive'.<sup>24</sup> However, though the other is a guest and there is entitlement to shelter, the guest can be expelled and has no right to share the host's wealth or possessions. Yet the host-guest relationship necessarily leads to disruption of unity and totality as embodied in the host through engaging with and confronting the other and difference as embodied in the guest. Although Derrida recognizes that putting hospitality into practice will inevitably introduce conditions, unconditional hospitality must remain the ideal and not be compromised, which associates it with the messianic, a key concept for the later Derrida and another major affinity between him and Eliot.

Derrida's essay on cosmopolitanism is relevant to the concept of 'hospitality', and it has particular connections with 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as both are written in a context of fear of 'great historic peoples', to use Eliot's phrase, being swamped by immigrants: 'This was a particularly dark year for France's reputation as a place of hospitality and refuge from oppression, with the clumsy and violent imposition of the Debret laws on immigrants and those without rights of residence.'<sup>25</sup> Derrida views the migrant or refugee as a guest in the 'host country'<sup>26</sup> and rejects the view that asylum should be accorded only to those who will not benefit in economic terms. He accepts that there are dangers in accepting the other or newcomer as guest as there will be a tension between



the ideal of unconditional hospitality and hospitality in practice. The latter implies that the 'host remains the master in the house, the country, the nation, he controls the threshold, he controls the borders, and when he welcomes the guest he wants to keep the mastery'; in contrast for 'unconditional hospitality to take place you have to take the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone ... Those are the risks involved in pure hospitality, if there is such a thing and I am not sure that there is'.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably there is an aporia in that true hospitality which must be unconditional to be ethical will be compromised when conditions come into play, as they must. Theophrastus likewise refuses to deny the right of asylum to 'wealth-acquiring immigrants' and accepts that the guest may be unpleasant and even dangerous from the point of view of the host, since immigrants' appreciation 'of our political and social life must often be as approximative or fatally erroneous as their delivery of our language' (*ITS*, 159) and urges that steps be taken to moderate the effects of that. For both Derrida and Eliot pragmatic considerations – 'the process ... political action, rhetoric, strategies, etc.'<sup>28</sup> – are thus unavoidable, introducing some conditionality.

'Process' or relations of power, both in terms of the microcosm and the macrocosm, with their inevitable 'modalities of violence', to use a phrase of Derrida's, are ubiquitous in Eliot's fiction, and the link between microcosm and macrocosm is spelled out in *Daniel Deronda* with imagery associated with colonialism and empire being applied to male–female relationships, particularly of course the Gwendolen–Grandcourt marriage. Many of Eliot's critics, however, especially those committed to Enlightenment values or radical politics, most obviously feminists, Marxists and post-colonialists, have been troubled by the apparent lack of any emancipatory dimension in her fiction. There is no indication of how the subjugated, whether they are women or the working class or subject peoples, can break free of their yokes. She appears to be sceptical of political solutions, thus her distancing herself from the radical ideas of contemporaries, such as the feminist Barbara Bodichon, the socialist Edith Simcox and the Comtean Frederic Harrison. What critics have failed to consider or been embarrassed by in Eliot is the messianic aspect of her later writing.<sup>29</sup> For admirers of Derrida's earlier writings, the stress on the messianic in his later writings has also been problematic. Even critics of his early work for being apolitical or the ultimate in scepticism and subversion did not expect the political to emerge in the context of messianism. Derrida's turn towards the messianic, however, perhaps helps to create a new context in which to consider the political aspect of Eliot's final two works, particularly in relation to the Enlightenment and its ideal of emancipation. For both writers, the messianic – which Derrida identifies with the *à venir* or the 'to come' – is emancipatory. He writes,

What remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism,

a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice – which we may distinguish from law or right or even human rights – and an idea of democracy – which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today.<sup>30</sup>

The messianic is clearly central to *Daniel Deronda* – being an intrinsic part of Mordecai’s Jewish mysticism – but critics generally have not noticed messianic intimations in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ Theophrastus writes,

A common humanity is *not yet* enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes the complete man. The time is *not come* for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. (*ITS*, 147, emphasis added)

Theophrastus does not rule out that all of these may be ‘to come’ and does not appear to reject them for being utopian. It may be messianic to contemplate such possibilities, but this is no reason to dismiss them. One is reminded of Derrida’s discussion of ‘come’ at the end of ‘On a Newly Risen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy’ where he writes,

The event of this ‘Come’ precedes and calls the event. It would be that starting from which there is any event, the coming, the to-come of the event that cannot be thought under the given category of event ... In this *affirmative* tone, ‘Come’ marks in itself, in oneself, neither a desire nor an order, neither a prayer nor a request [*demande*]. More precisely, the grammatical, linguistic, or semantic categories from which the ‘come’ would thus be determined are traversed by the ‘Come’.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the ‘to come’ is implied when Theophrastus states that ‘it is a calamity to the English, as to any other great historic people, to undergo a *premature* fusion with immigrants of alien blood’ (*ITS*, 158, emphasis added). Political criticism tends to see such a passage as racist, but the significance of ‘premature’ is ignored. Such fusion may be *premature* in the present, but in the future to come it may happen without conflict as a result of the ‘fusion of races’, which Theophrastus sees as ‘impossible to arrest’ (*ITS*, 160). Furthermore it is the ‘*too rapid* effacement’ (*ITS*, 160, emphasis added) of traditions and customs that would be a bad thing, implying that their eventual effacement – and presumably replacement – is to be expected.

Of course, the major messianic dimension of Eliot’s last two texts is the idea of the restoration of a Jewish nation in the future. When these texts were published this idea was generally seen, by both non-Jews and Jews, as so unlikely in terms of nineteenth-century political realities as to belong in the realm of ‘dreams’.<sup>32</sup> But the performative power of Eliot’s representation of Mordecai’s messianic idea is all too apparent now, bearing out Deronda’s contention that the future can confound rationalist assumptions or predictions about it: ‘A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life’ (*DD*, 448). A reviewer of *Daniel Deronda* in 1876 said of it, as a criticism,

that it 'may be defined as a religious novel without a religion'.<sup>33</sup> That points to perhaps one of the fundamental links between Eliot and Derrida and the relationship of their thought to the messianic. Both apparently atheists – Derrida wrote, 'I rightly pass for an atheist'<sup>34</sup> and according to F. W. H. Myers, Eliot said that God was 'inconceivable' – they nevertheless attached the highest value to religion, especially in its messianic aspect, and neither had any interest in debunking it: 'I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism left in me ... I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now' (*Letters*, IV, 64–5). For both, Judaism, in either its orthodox or mystical aspect, is particularly significant because the Messiah is still to come. Perhaps the major appeal of the messianic for both is that without it the incommensurability between justice or ethics or hospitality and actual conditions in the world appears to be unbridgeable. Such incommensurability can induce scepticism or hopelessness or the nihilism that one sees in certain of Eliot's characters, notably Tito Melema in *Romola*. The value of the messianic, though as Derrida emphasizes it is the messianic divorced from its traditional theological content, is that it is a projection beyond that incommensurability into the future 'to come'. Derrida has associated messianicity or messianism without religion with radical emancipatory politics such as antiglobalization movements and hope for 'the democracy to come'. Eliot's work can be linked with that as one sees with Mordecai when he takes the messianic vision of the restoration of Israel to even greater heights:

Let the torch of visible community be lit! Let the reason of Israel disclose itself in a great outward deed, and let there be another great migration ... Will any say 'It cannot be?' ... The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign ... Let us ... help to will our own better future and the better future of the world ... claim the brotherhood of our nation, and carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles. The vision is there; it will be fulfilled. (*DD*, 457, 459)

However, if messianic hopes and aspirations are actually achieved, then problems inevitably arise, and clearly the coming into being of Mordecai's messianic vision of the restoration of a Jewish nation in Palestine has given modern readers of Eliot who cannot avoid reading *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' in the context of the current situation in the Middle East some pause for thought. This lies at the root of many of the accusations of complicity with imperialism and colonialism that have been directed at her by recent critics. Mordecai's optimistic but limited interpretation of the story of the Gentile king and the Jewish maiden in Chapter 61 of *Daniel Deronda* certainly suggests Eliot's awareness that the messianic idealist will tend to edit out the ambiguities of the real world. But for Eliot (and Derrida) without the messianic there is no hope of aspiring beyond the contradictions, conflicts

and inequalities of the present and working towards something better in the future. The epigraph to the novel shows that Eliot is as aware of the human potential for corruption as writers like Conrad, and one can see the invoking of the messianic as a way of countering the pessimism that may induce. It provides hope for the future and creates ideals that can shape human action, but this non-theological messianism – ‘a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation’ that can create the promise of a ‘new Enlightenment for the century to come’<sup>35</sup> – will not be any the less vulnerable to human egotism, politics and the facts of history than religious messianisms of the past. Significantly Derrida has confessed that though he would like the Messiah to come ‘for that would be justice, peace, and revolution ... at the same time I am scared ... I would like the coming of the Messiah to be infinitely postponed’.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it is safer for a writer to conjure up messianic expectation in a negative form, as with Yeats in ‘The Second Coming’ or to hope like Derrida that it will be infinitely postponed. But the fulfilment of the messianic vision will always be deferred for as soon as it appears to be achieved the ambiguities of the world come along at the same time so that it again has to be projected into the future to come, as the apparent achievement of Mordecai’s messianic vision of a Jewish nation in the future indicates. Although Christ may be the Messiah for Christians, he has to come again and this second coming is still awaited. In the current situation in the Middle East it might seem that it is impossible to solve the problem of ‘opposite claims’, but when Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ a Jewish state in Palestine also seemed beyond the bounds of possibility. The ghost of Eliot might argue that if the latter could happen why not the former, so that a second manifestation of the messianic is now awaited.

### III

If there are affinities between Eliot and Derrida in regard to the political aspects of their writing, is this also the case with the other major concern of the later Derrida, the ethical, for clearly there is considerable overlap between the political and the ethical in Derrida’s writings? Morality is generally regarded as being at the centre of Eliot’s writing; indeed it has often been accused of being excessively moralistic since it is seen as being governed by a firm set of moral principles, based on Christian humanism, which her fiction promotes and applies. The severest critic of her moralism was Nietzsche when he attacked her for ‘cling[ing] all the more firmly to Christian morality’ despite rejecting the Christian god: ‘When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality.’<sup>37</sup> But Eliot’s affiliations with Derrida raise doubts as to whether her fiction should be seen in such terms. I shall suggest that her major concern is with the ethical in a proto-Derridean sense

rather than with the promotion and application of general moral principles or a set of moral norms.

The increasing emphasis in Derrida's later writing on the ethical – something that was not obvious to most commentators in his earlier writings, which were often attacked as leading to moral relativism and scepticism – has been linked to his continuing preoccupation with Levinas's philosophy with its predominant focus on the idea of the 'other'. However, an obvious difference between Eliot and Derrida and Levinas in regard to the ethical is that discussion operates at a high level of abstraction in Derrida's and especially Levinas's texts, with little application to concrete human situations, while in Eliot the emphasis is very much on the latter. Despite that basic difference, the concept of the ethical that emerges in her fiction, I shall argue, has similarities to that of Levinas and especially Derrida.

Undecidability is as crucial to the links between Eliot and Derrida in relation to the ethical as it is to the political. Derrida's best-known illustration of undecidability is in his discussion of Hamlet's dilemma in *Spectres of Marx*, which he summarized later in an interview: 'In the case of Hamlet ... the responsibility in front of his father's call, for it to be a responsibility, demands that choices be made ... So the son has to make a decision ... as a finite being he has to select within the heritage and that is again the question of undecidability.'<sup>38</sup> For Derrida decisions and the acts they generate will advance into an unknowable future and thus have the potential to return, ghost-like, to haunt the decider. Undecidability is also a recurrent feature of Eliot's fiction, with characters confronted by situations which call for choices that will haunt them no matter what they decide to do. Critics of Eliot have generally been unsympathetic to this aspect of her work, often seeing her as mired in self-contradiction, or vacillation or succumbing to conventional morality. This is especially so in regard to one of the most notable examples of undecidability in her fiction: in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver, after her inadvertent elopement with Stephen Guest (both she and Guest having commitments to other partners), has to decide between 'follow[ing] our strongest feeling [and] the ties that have made others dependent on us'. If she chose the former she claims she 'would be haunted by the suffering I had caused' (*MF*, 449–50), but others as well as herself will suffer no matter what she decides and she cannot know whether the consequences of returning home will be better or worse than if she decided to elope to the continent with Guest, whose opposing argument urging the self's claims over those of others – 'Would they have thanked us for anything so hollow as constancy without love?... You can't save them from pain now; you can only tear yourself from me, and make my life worthless to me' (*MF*, 475–6) – is not refuted. That many critics have attacked Maggie's choice on various grounds is an indication of a fundamental resistance to undecidability as a concept, since they are reluctant to recognize that there is no absolutely right decision in this context. Yet Maggie has to

decide, which makes her situation a tragic one. Derrida equates the necessity of making decisions in such contexts with the tragic, as his discussion of *Hamlet* shows, though for both Eliot and him the moment of decision moves beyond the rational: Maggie in leaving Stephen 'was not conscious of a decision ... it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention' (*MF*, 479).

In *Romola* Eliot actually uses the word 'ghost' in the context of Tito Melema's decision to abandon his benefactor and adopted father, Baldassarre. The painter Piero di Cosima, in sketching Tito, detects ghostly fear in Tito's countenance even though at this time there is no apparent threat:

He saw himself with his right hand uplifted, holding a wine-cup, in the attitude of triumphant joy, but with his face turned away from the cup with an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being thrown into sympathy with his imaged self.

'You are beginning to look like it already,' said Piero, with a short laugh, moving the picture away again. 'He's seeing a ghost – that fine young man. I shall finish it some day, when I've settled what sort of ghost is the most terrible – whether it should look solid, like a dead man come to life, or half transparent, like a mist'. (*R*, 180)

Tito is generally seen as one of Eliot's 'villains', and therefore his selfish decision may seem to have no connection with undecidability. Yet even he has to go through a process of deciding before choosing not to act to save Baldassarre, and among his reasons are the low chance of success and, later, moral scepticism and the utilitarian – or more exactly – Benthamite<sup>39</sup> argument that the pleasure not only of himself but of others would be the greater if he kept Baldassarre's gems for himself rather than using them to buy freedom for his benefactor, thus denying that the self has any responsibility to a specific other, whom the self can reason out of existence:

He had once said that on a fair assurance of his father's existence and whereabouts, he would unhesitatingly go after him. But, after all, *why* was he bound to go? What, looked at closely, was the end of all life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure? And was not his own blooming life a promise of incomparably more pleasure, not for himself only, but for others, than the withered wintry life of a man who was past the time of keen enjoyment, and whose ideas had stiffened into barren rigidity? (*R*, 111)

For Eliot, a major factor contributing to what Derrida calls 'the ordeal of undecidability'<sup>40</sup> is that total disinterestedness is impossible and those making decisions, even if they are at the opposite moral pole from Tito and strive to act without selfishness, can never eliminate completely self-interest or partiality or prejudice, thus the potential for being haunted by the future consequences of actions that cannot be anticipated. This is a recurrent idea in her fiction: 'But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds

never; they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness' (*R*, 156).

Derrida follows Levinas in arguing that the self is nothing without an 'other' and that the other must be responded to without being reduced to sameness in the process, though Derrida does not seem to have rejected the qualification he makes of Levinas's view of the other in his early essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' when he claims that self and other cannot be kept totally separate: 'If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse.'<sup>41</sup> Forms of human action and behaviour that aim completely to exclude the other are thus impossible, but an ethics that gives absolute priority to the other is also impossible. It is a critical commonplace that egotism is one of Eliot's deepest preoccupations, and though it may be sublimated it cannot be completely overcome, and if it could the self would be subject to dissolution. Her novels contain both characters who are ethical exclusivists who attempt to eliminate their own egotism in acting in the interests of others and also those who attempt to exclude the other completely in their pursuit of self-interest. Both attempts fail. Her critique of her many characters committed to extreme individualism is philosophical and proto-Derridean: the self not only is nothing without the other but the other is also within the self or mind.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Eliot is writing in a context in which the ethical is under attack as a result of Darwinism and the message that could be drawn from it, namely that the dynamic of the world is individual members of species acting purely for self-interest and survival in a world governed by the struggle for existence. The modern theory of 'the selfish gene' has added another dimension to this idea in order to overcome various apparent exceptions. Numerous commentators in the Victorian period warned that Darwinism was irreconcilable with morality as traditionally conceived, with the interests of others merely a threat to the interests of the self so that the self could justifiably dismiss them:

For assuredly the selfish man will seek, and justifiably, to evade or perform imperfectly his part in the moral contract, whenever he can with safety, and especially whenever his supposed interests come into collision with those of others. In short, with such an origin, virtue is effectually destroyed; and, indeed, vice not less; for there remains no essential or real distinction between them ... The human world that we imagined the only moral world becomes the most completely non-moral world, since man is the only animal that, having a conscience, is able to analyse it away, and thus escape from its authority.<sup>42</sup>

Eliot's criticism of such ideas involves neither reasserting conventional moral certainties derived from Christian ethics nor manipulating her plots so that those who adopt such a Darwinian approach to life are arbitrarily punished or come to a bad end. For her as for Derrida, since the human ego cannot exclude the other, the ethical is intrinsic to the human situation and her fiction shows the dire effect of attempts to live beyond the scope of the

ethical, and fundamental to the implied critique of these characters is that their individualism is flawed at its root by the existence of language which makes it impossible to separate self and other. Because language and thought are shared, the idea of the other cannot be discarded from thought and consciousness. Language entails that in any human situation certain ideas, values, conventions circulate among people. She shows the human price of attempting to live on the basis of extreme self-sufficient individualism rather than merely condemning it in terms of an absolute set of moral principles. Even if such a way of life does not lead to disastrous results – though it does for Tito, Christian in *Felix Holt* and Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* survive and move on – its refusal to acknowledge responsibility to the other, which inevitably leads to the isolation and alienation of the self, is the main ground for Eliot's ethical critique.

Of course, Eliot has often been linked with 'altruism', the word having been coined by Auguste Comte, but it has not been regarded by many Eliot critics or commentators as having much philosophical or intellectual substance, as it can be argued that altruism begs the question as to why one has a moral obligation to act for the benefit of others, a problem, it is claimed, that Eliot does not convincingly confront:

George Eliot was amenable to Lewes's and Spencer's goal of founding ethics on science, and egoism and altruism are key terms in her work, but Lewes, Comte, and George Eliot run into the same stumbling block: they begin by *assuming* that certain traits are inherently moral. In her thought, sympathy and altruism are unquestioned goods, but in the end, she is unable to provide any but intuitive grounds for accepting this view.<sup>43</sup>

The word 'altruism' is, of course, derived from combining the French *autrui* with the Latin, *alter*, meaning 'other'. Clearly Levinas's and Derrida's concept of the ethical as the relation to the other cannot be easily dismissed as lacking in philosophical substance, and as I have tried to show, there are some clear links with Eliot's form of altruism. For her as well as for Derrida, ethical decisions, in contrast to the view that they are determined by a pre-existing set of principles, must first go through 'the ordeal of undecidability' in order to be ethical at all, and of course this will necessarily bring the other into play. I would suggest that critics of Eliot in future should take account of her relationship to this alternative concept of the ethical rather than merely equating her commitment to altruism with a general humanism that is vulnerable to conventional philosophical critique.



## The Role of Luck in the Art, Ethics and Politics of *Daniel Deronda*

### I

This final chapter brings together the main concerns of the previous chapters through focusing on luck in *Daniel Deronda*. The novel's preoccupation with luck shows particularly clearly how Eliot's writing fuses her intellectualism with her commitment to the novel as literature since luck is central both to the novel's thematics in the areas of philosophy, ethics, politics, and also to its artistic form, the open ending, for example, pointing to a future that is unpredictable and will be affected by luck. Luck also brings into play further critique both of applications of Darwinism to the self and society and of the Byronic tradition and its associations with egotism, pessimism, nihilism, in which luck is often cited as justification. Eliot's artistic aspiration is perhaps at its highest level in this novel, but there is an interesting awareness that literary success may also be dependent on luck, particularly if a work looks to influence or shape the future and therefore must trust to luck that it will be positively received by its readers in the future. Beginnings as well as endings are destabilized and opening *in medias res* is not only innovative in terms of the form of nineteenth-century fiction but also a philosophical recognition that origins can provide no secure grounding for thought or action. But in creating a connection with classical epic Eliot implicitly suggests (as Joyce was to do in *Ulysses*) that the novel as a literary form can compete with the greatest works of the past. A strong case can be made that *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's most ambitious literary undertaking since it has greater scope than any of her other novels, encompassing a wider range of social life and having a European dimension as well as an English one. There is also greater psychological depth in relation to the representation of character than in her previous novels, especially in the proto-Freudian characterization of Gwendolen Harleth. It is also her most resonant text from a twenty-first century point of view because of its pertinence to perhaps the most powerful currents of contemporary critical and cultural theory in which the prime focus is on such issues as identity, imperialism, colonialism, racism, which are subjects of interest in the novel. Though these have been discussed in previous chapters, they have connections with luck that allow them to be seen from another perspective.

*Daniel Deronda* is one of the few nineteenth-century classic novels that continues to be controversial, both artistically and ideologically. Certain critical objections, some of which date back to its original reception, persist and new ones have emerged. Whereas the English part has always been highly regarded, with Gwendolen Harleth and Grandcourt in particular praised as masterly psychological studies in Eliot's most powerful realist style, the main Jewish characters have been much criticized for being idealized, with the Jewish plot itself being seen as more in keeping with the romance genre than with realism. The claim that the novel is structurally problematic remains a critical issue. In a challenging critique, published as recently as 2002, Pauline Nestor is unconvinced by the efforts of defenders of the novel to establish its artistic unity,<sup>1</sup> maintaining that there is a 'split' in the text: 'At its simplest, Gwendolen Harleth inhabits a world of realism and determinism, while Daniel Deronda dwells in a space of epic and prophecy.'<sup>2</sup> Such negative critical comment in regard to literary form and structure has been greatly reinforced by political attacks, the novel's apparent support for proto-Zionism being particularly controversial.<sup>3</sup> Some of these negative critical reactions can be countered if one takes luck into account.

The formal innovations in the novel especially highlight the role of luck. *Daniel Deronda* is fundamentally different in form and structure from Eliot's earlier novels in being set close to the time of writing and denying the reader stability in regard to the beginning and ending as well as disrupting conventional narrative movement through the use of flashback or analepsis. The epigraph to the first chapter asserts that all beginnings are 'make-believe' and claims that '[n]o retrospect will take us to the true beginning' (*DD*, 3), and the open ending leaves unresolved what will happen to the characters in the future, both personally and in terms of their hopes, a future conceived of as stretching well beyond the time of the novel's narration. Such an unresolved ending undermines the synchronic structure of the great majority of nineteenth-century narratives – often set well in the past – in which beginning, middle and end are known in advance and therefore tend to exist in a fixed and predictable relationship to each other. As the main characters in *Daniel Deronda* are left at a turning point in their lives with the reader having no secure knowledge about what the future will hold for them or their hopes, unpredictability is built into the novel's structure. This creates a context in which prophecy, chance, unexpected turns of event – all of which involve luck – can be brought into play with much greater force than in novels structured synchronically in which beginnings are not arbitrary or endings unresolved and consequently known before the narration starts. Much previous criticism of the Jewish plot, in particular for being dependent supposedly on coincidence and providential outcomes, has not sufficiently taken this into account.

The dominant form of realist narrative with its basis in probability and persuasive causality is thus destabilized, and this significantly affects how the

character is represented in relation to ethical questions, which are problematized when luck is brought into play. Instead of the emphasis being on how characters act and behave towards others in stable situations placed within a structure of events that have a definite end point, the focus shifts to consciousness<sup>4</sup> and whether people can act ethically towards the other with any authenticity if they belong to different mental worlds with incommensurable perspectives on life which lead to actions or decisions whose outcomes cannot be known for certain. Since the consequence or the effect of taking decisions which affect both self and other cannot be foreseen, the ethical cannot necessarily be dissociated from luck and gambling, as I shall discuss with particular reference to Deronda himself and his relationship with Gwendolen Harleth.

The view that the major Jewish characters are idealized has generally prevented critics from accepting that they are not in any way different at a fundamental level from the major non-Jewish characters. Both Jewish and non-Jewish characters tend to occupy separate mental worlds and are significantly affected by luck, undermining the claim that the text is 'split'. In an exchange between Mordecai and Mirah at the end of Chapter 61 there is disagreement about how to interpret a story from the Midrash about a Jewish maiden's love for a Gentile king being so apparently selfless that she chooses to die in place of the woman whom the king loves: 'This is the surpassing love, that loses self in the object of love.' But Mirah disputes Mordecai's reading:

'You can make the story so in your mind, Ezra, because you are great, and like to fancy the greatest that could be. But I think it was not really like that. The Jewish girl must have had jealousy in her heart, and she wanted somehow to have the first place in the king's mind. That is what she would die for.'

'My sister, thou hast read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as indwelling demons, unmixed with the relenting and devout elements of the soul. Thou judgest by the plays, and not by thy own heart, which is like our mother's.'

Mirah made no answer. (*DD*, 629)

At this point in the novel, Mirah has become consumed by jealousy since she fears that Deronda loves Gwendolen. Mordecai reads Mirah, however, in the manner of numerous commentators – Nestor, for example, sees her as 'a type of perfect womanhood' and refers to her as 'saintly'<sup>5</sup> – as the embodiment of such ideals as renunciation and purity of heart. But Mirah knows that Mordecai is misreading her. She is no longer the person who, in Chapter 32, was so secure in her identity as a Jewish woman that she had no problem accepting the subordinate role of women in the synagogue, which troubles Amy and Mab Meyrick. She now finds her racial identity under stress because of an overpowering love for a man she believes to be a Gentile. She keeps silent, however, as she realizes this would be disillusioning for Mordecai. The reader is put in a position to recognize that Mordecai's idealism has the effect of making him a poor reader of people and of literature. Not only is Mirah subject to

a corrosive jealousy and intensity of feeling that make her belong in a moral universe not intrinsically different from that of Gwendolen and Deronda's mother,<sup>6</sup> but clearly Mordecai's idealism – and this may be representative of all forms of idealism – exists at a removal from reality, which means that though it can potentially change it, it is also at risk of being crushed by it.

This scene is one of the many examples in the novel of characters being alienated from each other because their mental worlds are irreconcilable: Mirah's mental world is governed at this point by her love for the seemingly Gentile Deronda and her jealousy of Gwendolen, while Mordecai's is governed by the ideal of Jewish nationhood and a concept of love – at least female love – as renunciation of self. The change that takes place in Mirah which leads her to experience a sense of disconnection from both her earlier self and from Mordecai could be interpreted as a negative form of alienation. However, it may be seen more positively as, at least in embryo, a form of alienation similar to that of Deronda, that is, one in which there is potential for productive mental distantiation. Though this is not developed in the novel in relation to Mirah, it may suggest that the marriage between her and Deronda will be one in which there will be greater compatibility and equality than might have appeared likely when she was a failed suicide and an unreflecting product of Judaism and her Jewish heritage.

Underlying the division between Mordecai and Mirah are the different forms of their dependence on Deronda, and ultimately on luck, Mirah through her realization that she loves him and Mordecai through seeing him as central to his messianic vision. If Deronda is – as at first he appears to be – a Gentile, the identities of both will be threatened. Would Mirah, if Deronda had proposed marriage, have been able to reject intense personal love in favour of race and religion? Would Mordecai's vision have crumbled if Deronda had turned out not to be a Jew? Of course, these are hypothetical questions but surely what one can know is that if Mirah and Mordecai had been faced with a Deronda who remained unequivocally a Gentile, the result would have been an agonizing situation for each with unforeseeable consequences. What saves both Mirah and Mordecai from having to confront such dilemmas is luck: Deronda's good luck in turning out to have been born a Jew, which is also good luck for them. For many critics this is one of the problems of the novel, as it is argued that it takes it beyond realism into a world that is not governed by determinism and probability: '[Deronda, Mordecai and Mirah] move in a world in which the tragic conditions of life are suspended ... their world is other than our world not because they are greater than we but because their author has connived at the removal of all "obstacles and incongruities" from their path'.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, luck, good or bad, is destabilizing for realist fiction as any attempt to incorporate it in a realist narrative is open to the objection that the author is departing from the probable (luck by definition disrupts probability) and therefore manipulating events to serve certain authorial ends. Critics have

generally accepted Aristotle's view in his *Poetics* that a plot based on 'necessity' is superior to one based on chance and coincidence. Consequently, novels in which luck plays a central role – 'bad' luck most obviously in the case of Thomas Hardy's novels and 'good' luck in the case of *Daniel Deronda* (though whether luck can be clearly classified as good or bad is one of the questions raised in the novel) – have been problematic for many critics. But can any realism that aspires to authenticity leave luck out of an account of human experience? Eliot, as well as Hardy, was well aware of Darwin's *Origin of Species* where the emphasis on the role of 'chance' in the evolutionary process – particularly through the operation of random mutation – implies that luck is a factor in determining which species are able to adapt and survive in a perpetually changing world. This affects both writers' conception and representation of reality, especially Eliot's, where it is particularly clear that human decisions, actions and their consequences cannot be dissociated from luck and gambling. The open ending greatly reinforces this point in suggesting that actions and decisions create effects that stretch into an unpredictable future that necessarily defers any final judgement of their rightness or efficacy. Neither the characters, the reader, nor even the author can have knowledge of the consequences of actions or decisions that extend into a future beyond the time of the writing of the novel.

In the fullest critical discussion of gambling in *Daniel Deronda* it is claimed that Deronda's gambling in contrast to Gwendolen's has no problematic consequences and that this is further proof of the novel's split nature and incoherent structure: 'When Gwendolen gambles, it is an evil; when Deronda gambles ... he is blessed. Eliot repudiates one kind of gambling, while honoring the other. It tears the book apart.'<sup>8</sup> In my view this reading is unpersuasive. For the major characters in the novel, including Deronda, luck and gambling are not only almost unavoidable but also ethically problematic. The fact that lucky winners are intrinsically connected with unlucky losers creates an ethical dilemma, especially as there is no necessary relation between luck and desert.

Luck is thematized in the novel from the start when in the first chapter Gwendolen fantasizes that she will be worshipped as 'a goddess of luck' (*DD*, 6) when winning at the roulette table until her luck turns as a result, so she thinks, of Deronda's disapproving gaze. There is recurrent reference to it, as in the Heine epigraph to Chapter 62 and in Mirah's response to Hans Meyrick's claim that Grandcourt's death is 'rather uncommonly lucky' with Deronda being 'a lucky fellow in being there to take care of her'. This exchange between Meyrick and Mirah brings out the ethical ambiguity of luck since it becomes clear that luck creates losers as well as winners, some of whom will be inadvertent, and even those who appear to be winners may turn out ultimately to be losers in a future that cannot be predicted:

Why will you say he is lucky – why will you use words of that sort about life and death – when what is life to one is death to another? How do you know it would be lucky if he loved Mrs Grandcourt? It might be a great evil to him. She would

take him away from my brother – I know she would. Mr Deronda would not call that lucky – to pierce my brother’s heart. (*DD*, 622)

Of course, the subtext to this is that she fears that she will be made one of the unlucky ones if Meyrick is right, as she has fallen in love with Deronda. It might seem that the luck is with Meyrick at this point since the liaison between Deronda and Gwendolen that he envisages would seem to help his prospects with Mirah, but Meyrick’s assumptions about likely winners and losers are shattered by events that he could not have predicted, so that he ultimately turns out to be one of the novel’s losers.

Deronda, however, has no option but to rely on luck if he is to be in a position to commit himself to furthering Mordecai’s idealistic vision. He admits that in being drawn to Mordecai’s view of him as his destined successor he can be seen as being ‘in a state of complete superstition’ (*DD*, 424). He can only hope that luck will be on his side and that Mordecai might be right about his being a Jew: ‘Is my side of the relation to be disappointing or fulfilling? – well, if it is ever possible for me to fulfil, I will not disappoint’ (*DD*, 424). Also only luck will allow him to marry Mirah given that at first she indicates she could not marry anyone not of her race and faith, and at this point his being born a Jew seems to him extremely improbable. A character in Eliot’s previous fiction who is structurally related to Deronda in that he can only extricate himself from what appears to be a hopeless predicament by great good luck is Godfrey Cass in *Silas Marner*, since he will be deprived both of his inheritance and of the woman he loves by his having been tricked by his brother into marrying inappropriately and fathering a daughter. But good luck for him, though it is bad luck for his wife, apparently intervenes as his wife dies and his child is adopted by Marner without his connection with them being revealed. The only person who knows about it, his brother, disappears, which makes him able to inherit his father’s property and marry the woman he loves.

It might be objected that in allowing Deronda to achieve success and happiness through luck, Eliot offends against her own ethical critique of gambling and the reliance on luck in her earlier fiction. This is the case in *Silas Marner* where Godfrey’s luck eventually turns, when he and Nancy are childless and Eppie chooses to remain with Silas. This leads to disappointment, bitterness and frustration, which are expected outcomes for the gambler, especially in literature. With Deronda, those critics who see him as an ideal figure and who see the text as ‘split’ could claim that relying on luck is not subjected to critique as in *Silas Marner* but is used merely as a plot device to enable Deronda to discover a vocation with which he can identify and to marry the woman he loves without any problematic consequences. But for Eliot good luck is always problematic from an ethical point of view as it inevitably produces disequilibrium in the relationship between self and other, and this is as true for Deronda as for Godfrey Cass and other Eliot egotists; yet so

powerful has been the perception among critics that Deronda is intended to represent moral perfection or at least transcends egotism that there has been little discussion of it.

Although conventional gamblers are interested only in winning and have little concern for those who lose, Deronda is different in that he is mentally prepared for losing if luck goes against him as he has no expectation that the world will take any account of his desires and hopes. Even though he must rely on luck he does not at this point associate it with gambling. If he is unlucky he believes the only loser will be himself. The novel suggests, however, that any reliance on luck will necessarily bring gambling into play and affect other people inadvertently so that they become sucked into the categorial opposition of winning or losing. His hope that Mordecai may be right about him and his love for Mirah draw him into a close relationship with them.

Though he has no intention of encouraging Mordecai's prophetic certainties, his behaviour towards him nevertheless greatly amplifies Mordecai's faith that he is the person he has been waiting for. Any resistance on Deronda's part to that faith lacks vigour and does not carry great conviction since they continually meet and Deronda even begins to learn Hebrew. Yet at this time he believes that the most likely explanation of his origins is that he is the illegitimate son of Sir Hugo, and until he encountered Mirah, which he sees as a fortunate chance – 'It was my good chance to find you' (*DD*, 312) – he never thought he had any connection with Jews. He has to admit that the effect on Mordecai would be shattering if it turns out he is not a Jew: 'I shall almost inevitably have to be an active cause of that poor fellow's disappointment' (*DD*, 439). Being of Jewish origin is, of course, essential as for Mordecai only someone born a Jew could fulfil his vision, and Deronda believes Mirah's devotion to her religion would prevent her marrying outside of her race and faith. If he is unlucky and not a Jew he would not be the only loser as others have become caught up in his hopes. In not distancing himself from Mirah and Mordecai because of the uncertainty of his origins or strongly emphasizing the unlikelihood of his being a Jew, he is necessarily gambling with their hopes and turning them into inadvertent gamblers. That luck ultimately favours him does not alter the fact that he takes a moral risk in placing Mordecai in particular in a potentially dangerous mental situation since his whole life revolves around the visionary expectation of discovering a second self to carry on his work. Mirah would also have been a loser since an unanticipated consequence of his rescuing her and remaining in close touch with her is that she has fallen in love with him and he with her, though neither of them knows what the other feels. However, when it transpires that luck is with him and he finds out for certain his parents were Jewish, all three become winners and, as with Godfrey Cass's luck at first, there appear to be no obvious losers.

Not only is it great good luck for Deronda that his mother – having not long to live – decides to contact him and inform him of his origins but his

luck culminates in his learning that his grandfather had a vision with affinities to that of Mordecai. This puts him now in a position to commit himself fully to Mordecai's vision and thus to find a vocation in life with which he can identify and also to declare his love for Mirah and hope to marry her. But this accumulation of good luck is slightly spoiled by a troubled intuition that, as in gambling, good luck for some inevitably means bad luck for others. Lucky winners and unlucky losers are intrinsically connected. The fact that desert is not essentially involved in determining who belongs in which category means there can be guilt on the part of the winners and resentment on the part of the losers, and such incipient guilt enters into his consciousness and increases throughout the rest of the novel.

## II

What makes luck one of the unifying connections between the English and Jewish parts of the novel, at both a narrative and thematic level, is that Deronda's good luck is bad luck for Gwendolen. She is the novel's major loser, having repeatedly gambled and repeatedly lost. Chapters 55 to 57 are key chapters and in my view the encounter between Gwendolen and Deronda in these chapters is one of the most powerful episodes in the novel in artistic terms since there is dramatic equality between him and Gwendolen, it being evident here that Deronda cannot be credibly perceived as the idealized figure critics have generally seen him as being. In their scene together the collision between the lucky and the unlucky is at its most forceful in dramatic terms, and at the same time it brings into play one of the most radical ideas in the novel: luck's destabilization of morality as conceived both by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and by Kantian moral philosophy. The critical focus in previous discussions of this part of the novel, however, has tended to be almost solely on Gwendolen's situation, with the assumption that Deronda plays a purely altruistic role in the scene,<sup>9</sup> and this has generally led to a failure to appreciate the literary power of this crucial encounter. It therefore merits analysis in some detail.

After an initial meeting with Gwendolen and Grandcourt on the staircase of the hotel in Genoa on his way to a second meeting with his mother, Deronda returns with 'the world changed for him' (*DD*, 585). He is, however, beginning to realize the symbiotic relationship between winning and losing. Though eager to leave Genoa, he has to defer departure when he learns that Grandcourt has drowned: 'his mind went out to Gwendolen, with anxious remembrance of what had been' (*DD*, 586). His good luck is, of course, bad luck for her, making her again a loser: his mental world has radically changed and become separated from hers. Committing himself to Mordecai's ideal makes it inevitable he will have to leave her, and without his influence and support, even



before the drowning, he had feared for her mental and spiritual well-being. The word 'mournful' recurs in these chapters in relation to his consciousness, indicating his awareness that he is in a situation in which nothing can be done as is the case when someone dies and all one can do is mourn: 'Something of a mournful impatience perhaps added itself to the solicitude about Gwendolen' (*DD*, 586); 'a mournful suspense ... made him reluctant to speak' (*DD*, 590); 'that full glance in its intense mournfulness' (*DD*, 595). He accepts that he has a responsibility towards her, especially in her present state of mind after the death of Grandcourt, but he also knows that the change in his life now that he is certain of his Jewish origins has created a difference between them that will lead him on a path that has no place for her. His sense of responsibility towards her is thus a joyless and guilty one since, as I shall argue, it coexists with a desire to be free of her. However, how can he abandon a woman who has just seen her husband die and is in a hysterical condition? A major fear on his part is that her claim on and need for him will be so great as to threaten to take him over completely. His inner conflict is magnified as escape becomes more urgent but also more difficult. Is this luckless woman going to make it impossible for him to exploit his luck, at least not without a lacerating sense of guilt on his part?

Deronda's response to Gwendolen following the drowning of Grandcourt is hardly what we expect of the idealized character he is so widely perceived as being. The reader has had the advantage of seeing the build-up of hate on the part of Gwendolen for Grandcourt in their various scenes together. In that context her graphic account to Deronda of what happened on the boat, how she could have saved Grandcourt by throwing him a rope but could not bring herself to do so because of a pre-existing desire to kill him in her thoughts, is all too believable on the part of the reader. Though she sees her refusal to act as tantamount to murder, Deronda has his own reasons for refusing to accept it. His reaction is no more adequate to the occasion than is Mordecai's response to Mirah's reading of the story of the Gentile king and the Jewish maiden. He has little desire to hear any confession on her part that will draw him into her mental world and away from Mordecai's and Mirah's and his own hopes. He finds himself confronted with an ethical responsibility towards the other, especially as his good luck is directly connected with even more bad luck from her point of view, but he is conscious that this ethical responsibility is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the fact that the change in his life will effectively end any relationship between them. Pauline Nestor has argued that the 'drama of otherness' as represented in Eliot's earlier fiction is changed radically in *Daniel Deronda* since, she claims, the 'fundamental difference between self and other is collapsed through Deronda's discovery of his Jewishness'.<sup>10</sup> This scene on the contrary suggests that it is a major preoccupation of this novel. Deronda's joy at being able to identify with the self's desires and hopes created by his luck in turning out to be the Jew that Mordecai conceived him to be is

in danger of being sucked away by the demands of the unlucky other. When she suggests she could be a murderess he responds, “Great God!” ... in a deep, shaken voice, “don’t torture me needlessly. You have not murdered him” (DD, 591). This response shows the self resisting the claim of the other, as all the energies of the self ought ethically to engage with the needs of the other if what Gwendolen says is true. Deronda is divided between a reluctance to be drawn into the mental world of the other that may engulf him and an opposing ethical pressure to enter into human empathy with her at the level of feeling. He commits himself to her in a form of words – ‘I will not forsake you’ – but suffers guilt because he knows that his commitment is half-hearted: ‘And all the while he felt as if he were putting his name to a blank paper which might be filled up terribly’ (DD, 592). Throughout their scene together he refuses to accept Gwendolen’s judgement of herself as in effect a murderess, but in doing so is he not acting in his own interests as much as hers?

He has no wish to contemplate even the possibility that Gwendolen is a murderess, if only in a passive sense, any more than Mordecai wants to confront Mirah’s reading of the motives of the Jewish maiden. His assurances – ‘It could never be my impulse to forsake you’ – lack conviction and are more formal than truly felt: ‘His strong feeling for this stricken creature could not hinder rushing images of future difficulty’ (DD, 600). Like Mordecai, Deronda now has a higher aim in life that is self-defining for him. The needs of the other which are at odds with that aim must now take second place. This scene shows that ‘the selfless sympathy’<sup>11</sup> of Deronda is a limited perception of the character. When it comes to conflict between his mental world and that of the other, his proves to be stronger, which creates a moral problem. It is in this scene that the theme of luck with its creation of winners and losers is explicitly associated with guilt when Gwendolen tells him that in marrying Grandcourt and breaking her promise to Mrs Glasher ‘I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another’s loss – you remember? – it was like roulette – and the money burnt into me. And I could not complain. It was as if I had prayed that another should lose and I should win. And I had won. I knew it all – I knew I was guilty’ (DD, 593). This has application to Deronda as well as to Gwendolen, though of course she does not realize it. Through good luck his gamble that Mordecai is right about his being a Jew has been successful, but if he exploits his luck and chooses to abandon this unlucky woman who needs him she may suffer a mental breakdown or even attempt suicide. Confronted with this dilemma, the power to engage with the suffering of the other momentarily returns to him: ‘he was in one of those moments when the very anguish of passionate pity makes us ready to choose that we will know pleasure no more, and live only for the stricken and afflicted’ (DD, 595), echoing Dorothea’s tortured decision in *Middlemarch* to commit herself to continuing Casaubon’s work in which she no longer believes after his death. He finally restrains the interests of self,

takes her hand, a sign of reaching out to the other, and allows her to tell him her story.

Deronda has already had to listen to his mother's story, without much sympathy on his part because their mental worlds are so fundamentally different. But listening to Gwendolen enables him to connect with his Byronic mother as other – her life having been subject to bad luck after her operatic triumphs – since hearing Gwendolen's anguished account 'pierced him the deeper because it came closer upon another sad revelation of spiritual conflict' (*DD*, 594–5). Though the claim of his own mental world remains the stronger in both cases, there is an awareness on his part that the other's difference needs to be recognized and not merely assimilated to the demands of the self. Such an awareness, even if she would refuse to admit it, can also be seen as what motivated Deronda's mother to contact him and disclose his past. By choosing a new identity for him, one which cuts him off from knowledge of his origins, she had attempted to make him in her own image and deny him difference. But respecting difference means that the other must be allowed independent choice, which she eventually, if unwillingly and inadvertently, allows her son. Ironically, she had repeated the behaviour of the father against whom she had rebelled, by attempting to shape a child's life in conformity with her mental image. As she resisted her father's will – posthumously – Deronda resists her will. When given a choice, he makes one that is quite opposed to her own. This is a salutary lesson for her, but her behaviour has only taken denial of the other's difference to an extreme since the novel suggests that all human beings – even Deronda – have a natural tendency to respond to the other in terms of the interests of the self, as one sees in this scene between him and Gwendolen.

To free himself from her in order to pursue the new life that has opened up for him, he looks for a way of constructing her otherness in such a way that it is not a barrier to the self's desires and hopes through demanding his total commitment to her needs. It would therefore be easier to leave her if he can convince her that she did not murder Grandcourt and that nothing she could have done would have saved him. He attributes Grandcourt's drowning to cramp so that her throwing him a rope would not have helped, a less persuasive theory than that of the fishermen who believed he drowned because he could not swim. Even assurances of his support for her create anxiety that she will read too much into them and as a result hinder his own plans for the future. His absolving Gwendolen of any responsibility for Grandcourt's death is thus not wholly disinterested, but at least partly, if unconsciously, a strategy on his part as it will allow him to extricate himself from her before her friends arrive. She is left alone in a state of 'hysterical crying', a 'banished soul', and the last paragraph of the chapter has an ironic edge: 'She was found in this way, crushed on the floor. Such grief seemed natural in a poor lady whose husband had been drowned in her presence' (*DD*, 601). It is Deronda's abandoning her as much as the death of her husband that has reduced her to this state.

Deronda's foreboding and sense that there will be a price to pay for choosing the priorities of the mental world of the self over the needs of the other is borne out in later encounters between them:

He was the only creature who knew the real nature of Gwendolen's trouble: to withdraw himself from any appeal of hers would be to consign her to a dangerous loneliness. He could not reconcile himself to the cruelty of apparently rejecting her dependence on him; and yet in the nearer or farther distance he saw a coming wrench, which all present strengthening of their bond would make the harder. (*DD*, 660)

Even though he recognizes the 'cruelty' of acting in this way, 'He was obliged to risk that' (*DD*, 660). In other words he has to trust to luck that she will come to no harm. The ethical dilemma comes to a head in the last meeting between them in which he has to tell her of his plans to marry Mirah and leave England. This time he is the one to suffer and be convulsed by guilt: 'Deronda's anguish was intolerable. He could not help himself. He seized her outstretched hands and held them together and kneeled at her feet. She was the victim of his happiness. "I am cruel too, I am cruel," he repeated, with a sort of groan, looking up at her imploringly' (*DD*, 690). This scene is a reversal of their first encounter when Deronda's disapproving gaze created a sense of shame on Gwendolen's part which interrupted and shattered her run of luck. When he had discussed gambling later with her he had condemned it in abstract terms – 'I think it would be better for men not to gamble' (*DD*, 284) – though significantly accepting that luck inevitably plays a role in life: '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' (*DD*, 284). At that point he did not realize that he himself would have to confront this. In this penultimate chapter, with their roles reversed, he knows in concrete terms that his gain is another's loss. In accepting that gain and making Gwendolen a loser, is his choice ethically justifiable?

### III

Deronda's dilemma may be seen as a very Jewish one. His strongest desire is to devote himself to Mordecai's ideal, which offers him the vocation he has long been seeking. But Jewish moral thought strongly asserts the individual's responsibility towards the other, a moral commitment that is exemplified in the 'I-Thou' philosophy of Martin Buber and culminates in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas with its claim that in philosophy the ethical must have priority over the epistemological.<sup>12</sup> Eliot's ethical thinking has a strong relation to this Jewish tradition. Her knowledge of Jewish thought was encyclopaedic and she particularly admired Spinoza, whose *Ethics* she had translated. The theme of

sympathy that is recurrent in her fiction clearly owes much to Spinoza's thought, as previous critics have pointed out, especially the idea that human beings can free themselves from subjection to selfish emotions through reflecting on the fact that others are also subject to such emotions, thus recognizing both human connection and difference. This is shown most powerfully in Chapter 21 of *Middlemarch* when Dorothea emerges from the 'moral stupidity' of egotism and 'conceive[s] with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling ... that [Casaubon] had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (*M*, 208).

For Levinas even if the other person is 'other' in the most absolute sense, the demand presented by that other should not be compromised. Thus Levinas's ethics entails that self-interest or individual desire should submit to the demands of the other. Though Eliot would almost certainly have greatly respected such a view, the ethical perspective in *Daniel Deronda* is somewhat different since it suggests that not only can human beings never totally transcend their own mental world with its interests and priorities but also that it is open to question whether the moral ideal should always be to resist the ego's claims. She is perhaps closer to Derrida's position in his critical discussion of Levinas in his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', where he argues that self and other must have a shared humanity in order for the self to have an ethical responsibility towards the other, which implies that neither self nor other has an unquestionable ethical priority.<sup>13</sup> Gwendolen as other to Deronda is also seeing things from her own mental perspective. This raises the question as to why one set of claims and interests should completely abolish another set as Levinasian ethics would seem to demand. For Eliot ethical action emerges out of a negotiation between self and other, one which may prove impossible to achieve fully to the satisfaction of both but should at least be striven for. To assert that the other's claim should always be prior is a kind of moral absolutism that she challenges in her fiction. In some cases the other's claim may prove the more powerful, but in different cases it may not. One cannot leave context, circumstances and choice out of account in making ethical decisions. This can create complex moral predicaments, none more so than in *Middlemarch* when Dorothea has to decide whether to agree to devote herself to Casaubon's work after his death despite her loss of faith in it. After mental turmoil she is prepared to submit to his wish; she sees herself as 'fettered', but 'she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers' (*M*, 475). After his death, however, her 'embittering discovery' that he was a man 'whose thoughts were lower than she had believed' (*M*, 486) makes her feel no qualms about not continuing his work, thus rejecting the claim of the other. Though in one context and set of circumstances the demands of the other may prevail over the desires and aspirations that shape the self's mental world, in another context a different choice may be made. Mordecai, for example, saw the claim of the other as more powerful than the demands

of the self when he chose to turn back from journeying to the East to look after his mother.

Deronda is required to make a decision in a situation that is particularly undecidable in a Derridean sense: 'Ethics and politics ... start with undecidability.'<sup>14</sup> No compromise or pragmatic solution seems possible in Deronda's situation; yet a decision must be made in the knowledge that future events may call into question the rightness of the decision. As no fundamental principle can transcend choice in such a context of undecidability, it is inevitable that it will be associated with anguish and guilt. There would also be guilt if he decided that his moral responsibility towards Gwendolen necessitated delaying for an indeterminate length of time his devotion to Mordecai's proto-Zionist project, which could be shattering for a man with not long to live. The unresolved ending gives greater force to the anguish he feels when he finally has to disclose to Gwendolen the choice he has made as the consequences of decisions cannot be predicted with any security. Would Deronda's decision still be the right one if Gwendolen collapsed into a state of insanity or committed suicide after he left her or if his attempt to further Mordecai's vision proved to be a failure? What makes Deronda different from characters faced with 'undecidability' in Eliot's previous fiction, however, is that he trusts to luck and is aware that his decision involves 'risk'. Does this make it ethically dubious?

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel's treatment of luck is that significant philosophical issues are raised since Deronda's ethical dilemma anticipates modern philosophical discussion of whether luck makes a moral difference. If luck does make such a difference, then the conventional moral position which one finds in Judaeo-Christian and Kantian moral thinking that luck plays (or at least ought to play) no role in morality is questionable. If Deronda is again lucky and Gwendolen survives well enough without him and he proves worthy of Mordecai's hopes and expectations, then his decision to abandon her despite her need for him could be regarded as morally justified, but if she suffers mental breakdown or he fails to fulfil Mordecai's hopes, then his decision could be seen as morally problematic. Bernard Williams has used the idea of 'moral luck' to undermine the notion of morality and to argue, in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, for its replacement by the 'ethical': 'The ideals of morality have without doubt ... played a part in producing some actual justice in the world and in mobilizing power and social opportunity to compensate for bad luck in concrete terms. But the idea of a value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion.'<sup>15</sup> It may be more fruitful to regard Eliot as an 'ethical' writer in Williams's sense rather than the stern moralist that generations of readers and critics have seen her as being.

The main example Williams uses to exemplify the concept of moral luck is very pertinent to Deronda's situation. Williams argues that it is possible to see Gauguin or some version of him (the real Gauguin famously deserted his wife and five children to pursue his ambition to be a great painter) as not necessarily

an amoral figure: 'this other Gauguin is someone who shares the same world of moral concerns' as those who respect morality but who chooses to 'run ... a risk within morality',<sup>16</sup> a risk an amoral version of Gauguin would not have any conception of and so would not run. The risk is that if his ambition to be a great artist fails then the suffering he has inflicted on others as a result will have no moral justification, but if it succeeds it could be argued that his action is morally justifiable from a rational point of view. Eliot's representation of Deronda's relationship with Gwendolen and the ethical choice he is presented with anticipates Williams's Gauguin example. Deronda abandons Gwendolen though aware that she is extremely vulnerable and reliant on him in order to pursue an ideal that he knows may turn out to be unattainable. The unresolved ending of the novel defers any resolution of the question, the reader being given no knowledge of a future that is beyond the scope of the novel. This denies the reader (and author) knowledge as to whether Deronda's luck will hold into the future, with Gwendolen overcoming her demons without his help and his journey to 'the East' laying the foundations for the restoration of 'a political existence' (*DD*, 688) to the Jews. In Gwendolen's final letter to him, she can give no promises that she will be able to live up to his hopes for her: '*I do not yet see how that can be*', but her tone is guardedly optimistic. For Deronda, however, this letter is 'more precious than gold or gems' (*DD*, 694), as it gives him hope that abandoning Gwendolen may be less of a risk than he fears. He might, however, have been less reassured if he had known that after their last meeting, 'Through the day and half the night she fell continually into fits of shrieking' (*DD*, 692). But more positively, in that letter Deronda becomes the other for her when she acknowledges that she caused him to grieve on her behalf and accepts that he has chosen a life she cannot share in. The role of the other can oscillate, and perhaps for Eliot experiencing that shift and being able to reflect on it is fundamental to her Spinozan concept of the ethical.

The novel suggests that in relying on luck Deronda is not acting unethically though his actions may not be reconcilable with morality as viewed from a religious or Kantian position. Since luck permeates every aspect of life, as this novel shows, it cannot be excluded from the ethical. Judgements as to the rightness of decisions or actions cannot help but be deferred since ethical decisions may have unpredictable consequences in the future. In Victorian fiction generally, including Eliot's earlier novels, the ethical tends to demand decision and action in static situations: Jane Eyre resists the temptation to enter into a bigamous marriage with Rochester; Little Dorrit chooses to care for and protect her unworthy father; Romola overcomes her despair and disillusionment in taking action to relieve suffering in a plague-ridden village. But in *Deronda*, the ethical struggle takes place primarily and most powerfully within consciousness. The division between mental worlds is difficult to reconcile with the concept of responsibility towards the other, with the result that ethical choice may lead to anguish, as with Deronda. Luck and gambling

come into play since future events may call into question ethical decisions. This does not apply only to Deronda in the novel. Is Mordecai's apparently ethical decision to accept his unregenerate father – a man capable of virtually any action that will serve his self-interest – into his home not also a gamble? Mordecai may be seen as lucky, in that only Deronda's ring is stolen, but if Lapidoth had done something worse, such as a murder, the ethics of the original decision would at the very least be compromised, with Mordecai open to the *ex post facto* judgement of being guilty of taking an irresponsible risk. Whereas Mordecai sees the ethical in static terms that leave consequences out of the account, for Deronda, as one sees in his experience with the traumatized Gwendolen, ethical decisions bring into play risk, dependence on luck and anguished consciousness.

#### IV

The focus of this chapter so far has not been on the politics of the novel, particularly its concern with nationalism and proto-Zionism, and it could be argued that the political aspect is at odds with the view that luck, gambling and the unpredictability of the future shape the nature of the plot and the treatment of character and the ethical. Mordecai's prophetic vision of the achievement of Jewish nationhood and what most commentators have seen as Deronda's acceptance of and commitment to it have been widely interpreted as creating a plot in which visionary prophecy is the predominant element. Nestor, for example, refers to Deronda's 'embrace of Mordecai and his prophecy' and claims that he becomes virtually identical with Mordecai:

[T]he sense of Daniel's epic destiny depends not only on a repudiation of difference, but it also comes to rely on its concomitant, the psychological fantasy of wholeness, in which there is no lack ... So, Daniel is imaged as Mordecai's 'new self' ... and he comes to speak 'from Mordecai's mind as much as from his own' ... Their separate identities are fused.<sup>17</sup>

Such an identification of Deronda with Mordecai has been to a significant extent responsible for the view that Eliot departs from her former realism in favour of prophetic romance.

Amanda Anderson has, however, subjected the identification of Deronda with Mordecai to a persuasive critique:

Taking Mordecai's word for it, many critics have felt comfortable conflating the views of two characters who appeared destined to merge anyway. But Deronda actively resists Mordecai's vision of a complete mind-meld, precisely because it runs counter to his view of an open-ended dialogue, whether it be between individuals, between races, or between individuals and their own cultural heritage.<sup>18</sup>



She goes on to argue that '[d]espite the appearance of reconciliation', Deronda and Mordecai essentially 'occupy radically different philosophical universes'. However, her criticism of Mordecai for 'a form of organicist nationalistic doctrine, deriving from Herder and exemplified most dramatically in Adam Müller',<sup>19</sup> is more problematic. Herder supported nationality as a concept but as a cultural relativist was no orthodox nationalist and certainly different from Müller. Mordecai is close to Herder when he says, 'I cherish nothing for the Jewish nation, I seek nothing for them, but the good which promises the good of all nations' (*DD*, 458), and his ultimate aim is not only the Jews' 'better future' but 'the better future of the world' (*DD*, 459).<sup>20</sup> For Eliot, messianic prophets – even if, as Anderson puts it, they tend towards an authoritarianism that 'ultimately quells all argument and dialogue'<sup>21</sup> – are of value as inspirational figures and for generating visions that can shape action. Without Mordecai's prophetic sense of certainty Deronda would not have discovered the partiality that provides him ultimately with a vocation. Deronda himself has no aspirations to be a prophet. For him, therefore, success in founding a Jewish state will require luck, and his decision to devote his life to this ideal involves two significant gambles on his part: first that Mordecai is a great visionary and not merely a fanatic, and second that the restoration of Jewish nationhood will be a practical possibility. He accepts that he could fail – 'Failure will not be ignoble' (*DD*, 642) – and his account to Gwendolen of his 'task' also displays little prophetic confidence: 'I am resolved to begin it, however feebly ... At the least, I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own' (*DD*, 688). At the time of writing her novel Eliot could not, of course, know whether Deronda's luck will continue to hold, but realism is not sacrificed in favour of prophecy. However, this theme creates difficulties for readers of the novel at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for such readers, unlike Eliot as author, know that history provided the necessary luck since the cause to which Deronda chose to devote his life eventually succeeded. But as I have suggested above, good luck for some inevitably means bad luck for others, and Edward Said claimed that the success of the Zionist cause has been bad luck for Palestinians.

Mordecai's idealism, his prophetic vision of what will result from the foundation of a Jewish nation, 'a new Judaea, poised between East and West – a covenant of reconciliation' (*DD*, 459), seems a long way from being fulfilled and who knows if it ever will be. However, I would suggest that for Eliot idealistic prophecy should not be judged on the basis of accurate prediction of the future; its value lies in its messianic form. Deronda, like the later Derrida, his near namesake, shows no belief in messianism for its religious or metaphysical content, but as a structure without content – messianicity as Derrida calls it – it creates a hopeful openness towards a future to come that cannot be determined as it is subject to chance, accident, the unexpected.<sup>22</sup> It therefore cannot be dissociated from luck. In writing a novel that had a

political message and a prophetic dimension, even if its realization seemed to belong in the realm of the messianic, Eliot no doubt hoped – in effect trusted to luck – that this would further the greater good of the world, but of course there was always the possibility that it would fail or that even if it succeeded it would be seen as doing more harm than good. Responses to the novel at the time of its publication tended to view the ideal of Jewish nationhood as an utterly unrealistic aspiration, and its political aspect was therefore not taken very seriously, except among certain Jewish readers, and many readers now, influenced by Said and post-colonial criticism, view it negatively because they see it as having promoted colonialism and imperialism. How it will be viewed in the future is unpredictable. That will partly depend on future events and whether Mordecai proves to be a lucky or an unlucky visionary in regard to his messianic hope in reconciliation. In being open towards the future and having played a performative role in shaping it, a shaping that continues to be controversial and still politically unresolved, *Daniel Deronda* is likely to remain outside of critical consensus for the foreseeable future, with literary judgement and assessment continuing to be provisional.

# Notes

## Introduction

- 1 Kathleen Blake, 'George Eliot: The Critical Heritage' in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 202.
- 2 George Levine, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Levine, p. 8.
- 3 Virginia Woolf, 'George Eliot', first published in *Times Literary Supplement*, 1919, reprinted in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 277.
- 4 Quoted in Haight, *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, p. 81.
- 5 Mark Schorer, 'Fiction and the "Matrix of Analogy"', first published 1949, in Haight, *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, p. 277.
- 6 See Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: The Athlone Press, 1959) and W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).
- 7 See Stephen Heath's discussion of Eliot in *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek, 1972); Colin MacCabe, 'The End of a Metalanguage: From George Eliot to Dubliners', in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), and Catherine Belsey's discussion of Eliot in *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980).
- 8 See, for example, the discussion of Eliot in Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: New Left books, 1976).
- 9 See, for example, Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Anderson's *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), in which one of the central chapters is on Eliot.
- 10 See Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004). Eliot was almost certainly familiar with the Jena Romantics having visited Jena in 1855. She also remarks that she had read Adolf Stahr's book *Weimar und Jena*. See *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 89.
- 11 See *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 230.
- 12 U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism', *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1964), 306.
- 13 *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner: A Casebook*, eds Nahem Yousaf and Andrew Maunder (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 227.
- 14 Pauline Nestor makes a cogent point when she remarks, in comparing *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, that *Jane Eyre*'s status as a 'heroine of fulfilment' is 'founded on a psychological fantasy of the extraordinary and precocious assurance of Jane's ego, which is so markedly at odds with the childhood circumstances that produced it. Such a fantasy is diametrically opposed to Eliot's firm commitment to psychological veracity'. See *George Eliot: Critical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 69.

- 15 One notes a comment by George Levine: 'Science stands to the text of *Middlemarch* as religion stands to that of *Paradise Lost*.' See *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 256.

## Chapter 1: Eliot's critique of Darwinism

- 1 Such attacks have continued to be made. For example, Arthur Koestler asserted in a newspaper interview, 'If the neo-Darwinians are right ... and evolution is based on chance mutations, evolution and human history is a tale told by an idiot, and it is no wonder you have drop outs and hippies. If they're wrong, then at least you don't have this emptiness, there is less cause to take refuge in nihilism'. *The Guardian*, 7th February, 1972, p. 8.
- 2 Morse Peckham, 'Darwinism and Darwinisticism', *Victorian Studies*, 3 (1959–60), 28.
- 3 W. J. Harvey, 'Idea and Image in the Novels of George Eliot', in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 157.
- 4 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (9 vols, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–56, 1978), III, p. 227. All further references will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *Letters* with volume and page numbers.
- 5 In an essay first published in the *Westminster Review* in 1860, 'Darwin on the Origin of Species', he writes, 'notwithstanding the clearness of the style, those who attempt fairly to digest the book find much of it a sort of intellectual pemmican – a mass of facts crushed and pounded into shape, rather than held together by the ordinary medium of an obvious logical bond: due attention will, without doubt, discover this bond, but it is often hard to find'. Reprinted in *Man's Place in Nature and Other Essays* (London: Watts and Co., 1911), p. 301.
- 6 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1988), p. 94. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *DD*.
- 7 *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Nancy Henry (London: Pickering, 1994), p. 138. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *ITS*. It is interesting that Samuel Butler had a similar vision of machines taking over from the human species as early as 1863, as a result of reading *The Origin of Species*. He wrote a letter entitled 'Darwin among the Machines' in which he claimed that with the development of machines 'man will have become to the machine what the horse and dog are to man ... Day by day ... the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them ... the time will come when machines will hold the real supremacy over the world and its inhabitants'. See *The Notebooks of Samuel Butler: Author of Erewhon*, ed. H. F. Jones (London: A. C. Field, 1912), pp. 45–6. Butler thought Eliot had borrowed his idea without acknowledgement. Butler and Eliot were intellectually ahead of their time in anticipating recent science fiction, for example, the *Terminator* series of films, in which pitiless and morally indifferent machines appear to have an evolutionary advantage in a struggle for existence with the human species that has been weakened by having absorbed humane values. There are some indications in *The Descent of Man* that Darwin himself, though clearly in general sympathy with the values associated with Western civilization, may have had concerns about the unpredictable future consequences of human

- beings rejecting or resisting on moral grounds the evolutionary mechanism that had led to the emergence and success of *Homo sapiens* as a species.
- 8 *Fortnightly Review*, 3 (1868), p. 353.
  - 9 *Fortnightly Review*, 4 (1868), p. 507.
  - 10 *Fortnightly Review*, 4 (1868), pp. 62–3.
  - 11 G. H. Lewes, *The Physical Basis of Mind* (London: Trübner, 1877), p. 8.
  - 12 George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1988), p. 43. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *FH*.
  - 13 *Fortnightly Review*, 4, p. 63.
  - 14 *Fortnightly Review*, 4, p. 65.
  - 15 *Fortnightly Review*, 4, p. 74.
  - 16 Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature*, first published in 1863, made these implications quite clear.
  - 17 Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation* (London: H. S. King, 1876), I, pp. 163–4.
  - 18 James Sully, *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (London: H. S. King, 1877), p. 388.
  - 19 Quoted in Sully, *Pessimism*, p. 389.
  - 20 T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1894), p. 82. See also his essay in the same volume, 'The Struggle for Existence in Human Society'.
  - 21 See A. R. Wallace's *My Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905), II, pp. 14–15.
  - 22 William Graham, *The Creed of Science: Religious, Moral, and Social* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1881), p. 380.
  - 23 Ernst Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879), I, pp. 111–12.
  - 24 Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man*, II, p. 234.
  - 25 Charles Hodge, *What Is Darwinism* (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1874), pp. 172–3. Such reactions to Darwin raise issues which are still active. Jacques Monod's book, *Chance and Necessity* (1971), which is essentially a sophisticated development of ideas implicit in *The Origin of Species*, provoked similar reactions.
  - 26 A. R. Wallace, *The World of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1910), p. 391.
  - 27 Graham, *The Creed of Science*, p. 44.
  - 28 Graham, *The Creed of Science*, pp. 409–10.
  - 29 G. H. Lewes, *The Study of Psychology: Its Object, Scope, and Method* (London: Trübner, 1879), pp. 71–2.
  - 30 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 27.
  - 31 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 28.
  - 32 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 136.
  - 33 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 137.
  - 34 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 138.
  - 35 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, p. 139.
  - 36 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, pp. 142–7.
  - 37 Lewes, *The Study of Psychology*, pp. 151–2.
  - 38 In her well-known letter to Mrs H. F. Ponsonby, Eliot attacks the view that the amoral, deterministic world revealed by science has any connection with morality, which depends on purely human considerations. In such areas as molecular physics, 'you must banish from your field of view what is specifically human', but 'pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms' (*Letters*, VI, p. 99).
  - 39 See *Mind*, VI (1881), p. 498.

- 40 G. H. Lewes, *Foundations of a Creed* (London: Trübner, 1874), I, p. 159.
- 41 *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Haight, p. 87.
- 42 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 1988), p. 576. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to M.
- 43 Lewes, *Foundations of a Creed*, I, p. 175.

## Chapter 2: Eliot and the Byronic

- 1 See Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) for a detailed discussion of the Byronic egotist.
- 2 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, eds Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1987), p. 127.
- 3 F. A. Lange, *History of Materialism*, trans. E. C. Thomas (London: Trübner, 1880), II, p. 254. However, Lange thinks this is a complete misinterpretation of Feuerbach.
- 4 Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (London: Libertarian Book Club, 1912), p. 248, emphasis in original. See also R. W. K. Paterson's *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), especially p. 42.
- 5 *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago, IL: Gateway, 1967), p. 203. Emphasis in original.
- 6 *George Eliot's Life as Narrated in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross (Cabinet ed.; Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, n.d.), III, p. 38.
- 7 George Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1879), p. 84. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and incorporated in the text, abbreviated to SG.
- 8 See Earl R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore, MD: Language Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), p. 11.

## Chapter 3: Eliot and moral philosophy: Kant and *The Mill on the Floss*

- 1 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 464, emphasis in original.
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 69.
- 3 Suzy Anger, 'George Eliot and Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Levine, p. 95.
- 4 Joan Bennett in *George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner: A Casebook*, ed. R. P. Draper (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 123.
- 5 Laurence Lerner in Draper, *George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner*, p. 165.
- 6 Neil Roberts, *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art* (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p. 96.
- 7 U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 232.
- 8 Blake, 'George Eliot', p. 216.
- 9 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 131.
- 10 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, pp. 387–8.

- 11 *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1964), pp. 114–16. Emphasis in original.
- 12 Thomas Pinney, 'More Leaves from George Eliot's Notebook', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 29 (1965–66), 365. The most influential defence of the view that Eliot was a determinist and in fundamental agreement with Mill's claim that there was no conflict between moral philosophy and determinism is George Levine's article 'Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot', *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 268–79. Levine writes, 'Her novels, letters, and essays suggest that her position ... was very close to John Stuart Mill's, and if she was inconsistent she was no more so than Mill' (p. 262). However, Levine's article was published before Pinney made Eliot's short essay 'Moral Freedom' available in print. The claim that one had to believe in free will even if it was a fiction is associated in the nineteenth century with neo-Kantianism, especially Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, published in 1911 but begun in the 1870s.
- 13 *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green, 1909), p. 165.
- 14 *The Moral Law*, pp. 92–93. Emphasis in original.
- 15 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996), pp. 449–50. All subsequent page numbers are from this edition and included within the text, abbreviated to *MF*.
- 16 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 153.
- 17 See Thomas Pinney, 'The Authority of the Past in George Eliot's Novels', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 21 (1966–67), 131–47 and Roberts, *George Eliot*, p. 102.
- 18 George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. David Lodge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 340. All subsequent page numbers are from this edition and included within the text, abbreviated to *SCL*.
- 19 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1910), pp. 170, 172–3.
- 20 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 152.
- 21 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951), p. 286.

#### Chapter 4: The role of the narrator in Eliot's fiction, especially *Middlemarch*

- 1 See *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Haight, p. 64.
- 2 Michael York Mason, 'Middlemarch and Science: Problems of Life and Mind', *Review of English Studies*, 22 (May, 1971), 157.
- 3 Quoted in Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850–1870* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 103–4.
- 4 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 153.
- 5 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 434.
- 6 See David R. Carroll, 'Unity through Analogy: An Interpretation of *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Studies*, 2 (1958–59), 305–16.
- 7 Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form*, pp. 115–34.
- 8 See John Bayley, 'The Pastoral of Intellect' in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 199–213.
- 9 See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). A passage in *The Mill on the Floss* shows that Eliot was familiar with the mirror analogy for the mind's relation to reality: 'But then it is open to someone else to follow great authorities, and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror' (*MF*, 140).

- 10 See James's essay, 'Anthony Trollope', *Partial Portraits*, in *Trollope: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald Smalley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969): 'It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history' (p. 536). Even in the later James, one can find the following comment by the narrator: 'All sorts of thing, in fact, now seemed to come over him [Strether], comparatively few of which his chronicler can hope for space to mention.' See Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York: Signet, 1960), p. 34. Interestingly, Conrad's narrator, like Eliot's, sometimes refers to himself in the first person as writing about real people and events, thus placing himself within the novel: 'Those of us whom business or curiosity took to Sulaco ... The outward appearances had not changed then as they have changed since, as I am told.' Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 89. There is thus more continuity than critics have tended to think between Eliot's form of narration and that of her major successors who have often been seen not only as adopting a different approach but also associated with modernism in fiction.
- 11 Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 139.
- 12 See Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 42. Barrett's argument is partly anticipated in a Marxian-influenced article by Graham Martin entitled 'The Mill on the Floss and the Unreliable Narrator', in *George Eliot: Centenary Essays and an Unpublished Fragment*, ed. Anne Smith (London: Vision Press, 1980), pp. 36–54. Like Barrett, Martin finds the narration continually problematic – 'The narrator's judgements reveal a persistent failure to know what to make of the issues raised by the story' (p. 43) – but does not like Barrett try to resolve the problem but sees the narration as mired in ambiguities and discontinuities, which he concludes are rooted in Eliot's inability to overcome contradictions and conflicts intrinsic to her political ideology: 'In *The Mill* itself, we see the evidence of conflicts which are subsequently suppressed, only to re-emerge as significant evasions and silences affecting every aspect of the formal structure of the novels' (p. 54). One can, however, read Martin's article against the grain as inadvertently showing that the narrator's discourse is not, and is not intended to be, monological.
- 13 See Blake, 'George Eliot', p. 216.
- 14 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 107–8.
- 15 Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p. 67.
- 16 Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p. 141.
- 17 See *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 1265.
- 18 See *The Guardian*, 4 August 2007.
- 19 George Steiner, 'A Preface to *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9 (1954–55), 271.
- 20 Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot*, p. 69.

## Chapter 5: Prototypes and symbolism in *Middlemarch*

- 1 Richard Ellmann, 'Dorothea's Husbands', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 February 1973.
- 2 For several essays on possible models for Eliot's characters see Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot's Originals and Contemporaries: Essays in Victorian Literary History*



- and *Biography*, ed. Hugh Witemeyer (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992).
- 3 See Bonaparte's introduction to *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll, p. xvii. See also U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of *Middlemarch*', in *This Particular Web: Essays on 'Middlemarch'*, ed. Ian Adam (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 41–72, for further discussion of the significance of the names of characters in the novel.
  - 4 John Sparrow, *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 15.
  - 5 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, p. 448.
  - 6 The last chapter is the same in both the 1875 and the 1892 editions. It is the main source of our knowledge of Casaubon's character.
  - 7 *Quarterly Review*, 93 (September 1853), 471.
  - 8 Mark Pattison, *Isaac Casaubon 1559–1614* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875). All further references to this work will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *Isaac Casaubon* with page numbers.
  - 9 *Quarterly Review*, 499.
  - 10 Gertrude Reese, 'Isaac Casaubon and "A Grammarian's Funeral"', *Notes and Queries*, 192 (1947), 470–2.
  - 11 W. J. Harvey, 'The Intellectual Background to the Novel', in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Athlone Press, 1967), p. 35.
  - 12 There is no reference to Dorothea Schlegel in George Eliot's letters or non-fiction. However, between 17 June and 2 July 1870, George Eliot was reading aloud to Lewes the letters of Felix Mendelssohn, who was the nephew of Dorothea Schlegel. This was shortly before she began the 'Miss Brooke' story, and it is possible that this suggested to her a character partly based on Mendelssohn's aunt. Eliot, however, does not set limits to symbolic meaning or restrict its possibilities so that the name 'Dorothea' also resonates with Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* and with St Dorothea, discussed by Anna Brownell Jameson in her study *Sacred and Legendary Art*. See Gillian Beer's discussion of the influence of Mrs Jameson on Eliot in 'Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and "The Lifted Veil"', in *This Particular Web*, ed. Adam, pp. 91–115.
  - 13 Robert M. Wernaer, *Romanticism and the Romantic School in Germany* (New York and London: Appleton, 1910), pp. 83–4.
  - 14 Wernaer, *Romanticism and the Romantic School in Germany*, p. 85.
  - 15 *Biographie Universelle*, 38 (Paris: Chez Madame C. Desplaces, 1870–73), p. 350.
  - 16 Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective: A Comparative Study of Aspects of the Romantic Movements in England, France and Germany* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 19.
  - 17 Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective*, p. 19.
  - 18 Haight, *George Eliot's Originals and Contemporaries*, pp. 41–2.
  - 19 Wernaer, *Romanticism and the Romantic School in Germany*, p. 86.
  - 20 Wernaer, *Romanticism and the Romantic School in Germany*, pp. 75–6.
  - 21 Quoted in H. E. Jacob, *Felix Mendelssohn and His Times*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Barrie and Rockcliff, 1963), p. 24. Supporters of the early Schlegel tend to think she had a bad effect on him. Ricarda Huch, for example, writes, 'Sie hätte ihn beflügeln sollen und zog ihn, in der Meinung, sein Wohl zu befördern, mit starkem Gewicht zur Erde' (She ought to have inspired him, but thinking she was acting in his best interests, she pulled him forcefully down to earth). See *Blütezeit der Romantik* (Leipzig: Haessel, 1905), p. 22.

## Chapter 6: Anticipations of modernism in Eliot's fiction

- 1 D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 8–9.
- 2 For a discussion of this see Margaret Loewen Reimer, 'The Spoiled Child: What Happened to Gwendolen Harleth', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 36 (2007), 33–50.
- 3 For a discussion of Eliot in relation to Jewish myth and mysticism, see Saleel Nurbhai and K. M. Newton, *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels: Jewish Myth and Mysticism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002).
- 4 See, for example, on Greek myth, Joseph Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot's Mythmaking* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977). Knoepfmacher discusses the influence of Milton in *George Eliot's Early Novels*. See also Diana Postlethwaite, 'When George Eliot Read Milton: The Muse in a Different Voice', *ELH*, 57 (1990), 197–201.
- 5 George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996), p. 177. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *AB*.
- 6 See Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot's Mythmaking*, pp. 67–8.
- 7 David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Evaluation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), pp. 218, 244.
- 8 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, pp. 433–4.
- 9 Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, p. 244.
- 10 See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).
- 11 Knoepfmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, pp. 240, 247. Other critics have shared Knoepfmacher's view. Walter Allen states that it is 'essentially a myth of spiritual rebirth'. See *George Eliot* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), p. 120. F. R. Leavis thinks that 'the atmosphere precludes too direct a reference ... to our everyday sense of how things happen'. See *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 59. Mario Praz states, '*Silas Marner* is simply an allegorical fairy-tale: Silas finds the gold of the little girl's hair instead of the material gold he had been longing for'. See *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 352.
- 12 See, for example, MacCabe's discussion of Eliot in relation to Joyce in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*.
- 13 T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', in *James Joyce: Ulysses; A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. John Coyle (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 22.
- 14 Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), p. 181.
- 15 In his book *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), Jim Reilly is troubled by apparent contradictions in Eliot: 'She seems to be able to express scepticism and yearning simultaneously towards an object that is more contradictory the more one examines it' (pp. 56–7). Reilly perhaps fails to appreciate Eliot's links with Romantic irony, which holds such contradictions in balance without resolving them. Reilly also does not see the point of her use of myth and asserts that 'myths are required to mask social tensions and oppressions for which they offer purely illusory solutions' (p. 95). Reilly, in my view, fails to comprehend the role of myth in Eliot and how she uses it to escape some of the limitations within realism that Reilly discusses fairly persuasively.
- 16 Joyce famously remarked of *Ulysses* that 'it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant'. Perhaps Eliot also anticipated him here. See, for example, U. C. Knoepfmacher's discussion of some of the 'cryptic

- allusion[s]' in *Middlemarch* in 'Fusing Fact and Myth' in *This Particular Web*, ed. Adam, especially pp. 59–65 and Mark Wormald, 'Microscopy and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 50 (1996), 501–24.
- 17 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 140.
  - 18 Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 10, 20.
  - 19 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 207.
  - 20 See Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 51–52.
  - 21 The power of Jewish stereotypes which any novelist who creates Jewish characters will have to contend with is demonstrated forcibly by Frank Felsenstein in *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660–1830* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Because of this power of the Jewish stereotype Eliot may have concluded that with the minor Jewish characters stereotyping could not be entirely avoided though an effort is made to subvert the anti-Semitism associated with it.
  - 22 For a discussion of Yeats's relation to 'belief', see Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 39–61.
  - 23 Lewes, *The Foundations of a Creed*, p. 329.
  - 24 'The reveries from which it was difficult for him [Lydgate] to detach himself were ideal constructions of something else than Rosamond's virtues' (*M*, 270).
  - 25 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York, Evanston, IL, and London: Harper, 1957), p. 63.

## Chapter 7: Realism and romance: Allusion and intertextuality in *Daniel Deronda*

- 1 On Greek tragedy, see Fred C. Thomson, 'Felix Holt and Classical Tragedy', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16 (1961), 47–58; on Dante, see Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); on Milton, see Postlethwaite, 'When George Eliot Read Milton', pp. 197–201; on Goethe, see Gerlinde Röder-Bolton, *George Eliot and Goethe: An Elective Affinity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998); on Godwin, see Damian Walford Davies, 'The Politics of Allusion: *Caleb Williams*, *The Iron Chest*, *Middlemarch*, and the *Armoire de Fer*', *Review of English Studies*, 53 (2002), 526–43.
- 2 Barthes-influenced critiques of Eliot can be found in MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, and Belsey, *Critical Practice*. Deconstructive readings can be found in J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative and History', *ELH*, 41 (1974), 455–73 and 'Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 125–45.
- 3 Alice R. Kaminsky, ed. *Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 87.
- 4 The major study of Eliot in relation to hermeneutics is that of David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 5 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 433.

- 6 *Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes*, ed. Kaminsky, p. 87. Emphasis in original.
- 7 See Hock Guan Tjoa, *George Henry Lewes: A Victorian Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 66.
- 8 On Eliot and science, see Mason, 'Middlemarch and Science', pp. 151–69, and Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 9 Roland Barthes equates literary realism with 'scientific discourse' in that both 'postulate that there exists a neutral state of language' ('Science versus Literature', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 1967, p. 898). Christopher Norris in contrast argues that the realist assumptions of science are legitimate and defensible and attacks Saussurian and other forms of anti-realism, referring to 'a thoroughly inadequate theory of language derived from a selective reading of Saussure on the "arbitrary" nature of the sign' (*Resources of Realism: Prospects for 'Post-Analytic' Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. xv). Geoffrey Galt Harpham mounts a thoroughgoing critique of Saussurian linguistics and theories based upon it in *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 10 Joseph W. Childers describes an attack by David Masson on realism: 'in direct contrast to Lewes, Masson thought realism was the death knell of the novel. For him, realism was necessarily bounded by sameness and monotony: it dampened the imagination and forced an uninspired attention to the unexceptional'. See 'Victorian Theories of the Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 417.
- 11 Tjoa, *George Henry Lewes*, p. 65.
- 12 G. H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature* (Farnborough, Hampshire: Gregg International, 1969), pp. 25–6. (First published 1865.)
- 13 See, for example, the reference to Lavoisier in *Middlemarch*: 'Doubtless a vigorous error vigorously pursued has kept the embryos of truth a-breathing: the quest of gold being at the same time a questioning of substances, the body of chemistry is prepared for its soul, and Lavoisier is born' (M, 472).
- 14 *Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes*, ed. Kaminsky, p. 106. Emphasis in original.
- 15 F. R. Leavis discusses the influence of Hawthorne on Eliot in the foreword to George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Signet, 1961), pp. ix–xi.
- 16 For an overview of Eliot's use of Scott in her fiction generally, see entry on Scott in *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 369–72.
- 17 'Scott endeavours to portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces.' See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 33.
- 18 For further discussion of the relation between *Ivanhoe* and *Daniel Deronda*, see Nurbhai and Newton, *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels*, pp. 32–3.
- 19 Scott wrote in his journal on 14 March 1826: 'The Big Bow-Wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me.' See B. C. Southam, ed. *Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 155.
- 20 Deirdre Le Faye, ed. *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 323.

- 21 For a defence of the view that Eliot's narrator should be seen as a 'constructor and interpreter of the narrative' rather than as a God-like, omniscient presence, see Chapter 4 of this study.
- 22 See Edward W. Said, 'Jane Austen and Empire', in *Theory into Practice: A Reader in Modern Literary Criticism*, ed. K. M. Newton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 291–308; B. C. Southam, 'The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and the Chronology of *Mansfield Park*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 February 1995, pp. 13–14; Joseph Lew, "'That Abominable Traffic": *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery', in *History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Beth Fowkes Tobin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 271–300; Susan Fraiman, 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995), 805–21.
- 23 See Lew's essay, for example.
- 24 Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 107.
- 25 Said, 'Jane Austen and Empire', p. 306.
- 26 Eliot is likely to have agreed with Lewes on Austen; one of her greatest admirers, he saw her as a consummate artist though not a thinker: 'Her pages have no sudden illuminations ... she has neither fervid nor philosophic comment. Her charm lies solely in the art of representing life and character, and that is exquisite' (*Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes*, ed. Kaminsky, p. 93).
- 27 Said, 'Jane Austen and Empire', p. 301.
- 28 See, for example, Roger Gard, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
- 29 Nancy Henry in a critique of Susan Meyer's book *Imperialism at Home* also relates the West Indian reference in *Daniel Deronda* to Said's discussion of the significance of Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, but Henry does not suggest, in contrast to my view, that Eliot was consciously alluding to *Mansfield Park*. See Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 110–12.
- 30 *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 221.
- 31 Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 99.
- 32 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 271.
- 33 See Alison Booth, 'Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 41 (1986–87), 190–216. Eliot's use of Dickens is not confined to *Little Dorrit* and is a subject that could be explored further. There are, for example, fairly obvious links between *Felix Holt* and *Bleak House*, Mrs Transome's life and characterization owing a good deal to the Lady Dedlock plot. The fact that in both novels the heroine is called Esther suggests that Eliot is drawing attention to connections with *Bleak House*, just as she alerts the reader to her use of *The Scarlet Letter* in *Adam Bede* by naming her heroine Hetty.
- 34 Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), pp. 1–2.
- 35 Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p. 170.
- 36 Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p. 161.
- 37 Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p. 551.
- 38 Carol Christ, 'Aggression and Providential Death in George Eliot's Fiction', *Novel*, 9 (1975–76), 130, 136.
- 39 'Chance' is, of course, related to gambling and is a keyword in Darwin's *Origin of Species*. For discussion of allusions to natural selection in *Daniel Deronda* see Chapter 1 of this study.

## Chapter 8: Circumcision, realism and irony in *Daniel Deronda*

- 1 Steven Marcus, 'Human Nature, Social Orders, and 19th Century Systems of Explanation: Starting in with George Eliot', *Salmagundi*, 28 (1975), 41.
- 2 Cynthia Chase, 'The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double Reading *Daniel Deronda*', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 222–3.
- 3 Chase, 'The Decomposition of the Elephants', p. 217.
- 4 It is possible, however, that Henry James is covertly alluding to this missing 'detail' when, in '*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*', Pulcheria makes what might seem, on the face of it, a rather distasteful remark: 'I am sure he had a nose, and I hold that the author has shown great pusillanimity in her treatment of it. She has quite shirked it.' See *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Haight, p. 100.
- 5 John Sutherland, 'Is *Daniel Deronda* Circumcised?' in *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 169–76. Sutherland's view of the circumcision issue is shared by Jane Irwin in her edition of *George Eliot's 'Daniel Deronda' Notebooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 341. For a longer critique of Sutherland's essay, see K. M. Newton, 'Sutherland's Puzzles: The Case of *Daniel Deronda*', *Essays in Criticism*, 48 (1998), pp. 1–12.
- 6 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 28.
- 7 Samuel Cooper, *Practice of Surgery* (London: Longmans, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1826), pp. 577–8.
- 8 John Erichsen, *The Science and Art of Surgery* (London: Longmans, Green, 1853), p. 910.
- 9 W. H. A. Jacobson, *The Diseases of the Male Organs of Generation* (London: J. and A. Churchill, 1893), p. 622.
- 10 Sir James Paget, *Clinical Lectures and Essays*, ed. Howard Marsh (London: Longmans, Green, 1879), p. 71.
- 11 See William Baker, *The George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Library: An Annotated Catalogue of Their Books at Dr Williams's Library, London* (New York and London: Garland, 1977), p. 153.
- 12 P. C. Remondino, *History of Circumcision* (Philadelphia and London: Davis, 1891), p. iv.
- 13 Paget, *Clinical Lectures*, pp. 291–2.
- 14 Alex Comfort, *The Anxiety Makers: Some Curious Preoccupations of the Medical Profession* (London: Nelson, 1967), p. 95.
- 15 William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life* (London: John Churchill, 1858), pp. 23–4.
- 16 Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life*, p. 24.
- 17 T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet and His Problems', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 101. Emphasis in original.
- 18 Chase, 'The Decomposition of the Elephants', p. 215.
- 19 See, however, Mary Wilson Carpenter, 'The Apocalypse of the Old Testament: *Daniel Deronda* and the Interpretation of Interpretation', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 56–71, which argues that the apocalyptic symbolism suggests that circumcision is intended to be included.
- 20 Taking the last three chapters on *Daniel Deronda* together – along with the further discussion of it in Chapter 13 – it is tempting to see Eliot as not

merely anticipating modernism but also certain aspects of postmodernism and even developments beyond it. Apparently towards the latter part of his career David Foster Wallace had become disillusioned with postmodernist-associated genres such as metafiction and believed on ethical grounds that there should be a return to a genuine human dimension in fiction similar to that achieved by the great realists, such as Tolstoy. Eventually, however, he attempted to create a hybrid form combining such realism with the postmodern. *Daniel Deronda's* self-conscious literariness, allusiveness, range of knowledge and reference, possible playfulness, yet without there being any rejection or abandonment of realism, would also seem to aspire to be such a hybrid. (This aspect of Wallace was discussed in a BBC Radio 3 programme on him, 'Sunday Feature: Endnotes: David Foster Wallace', 6 February 2011.)

## Chapter 9: Formal experiment and ideological critique: *Silas Marner* and 'Victorian values'

- 1 Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*, p. 1. *The Mill on the Floss* may also appear to be fundamentally different from a novel like *Daniel Deronda*, but as Nancy Henry has shown it is, like the later novel, a highly allusive text. See 'Introduction' to *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Nancy Henry (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).
- 2 George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. F. E. Bevan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. vi.
- 3 See, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Life's Empty Pack: Notes toward a Literary Daughteronomy', *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1985), 355–84.
- 4 Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, trans. Davidson, p. 352.
- 5 Walter Allen, *George Eliot* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), p. 120.
- 6 See *Letters*, III, p. 382.
- 7 Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 59.
- 8 Jerome Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 59.
- 9 George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996), p. 4. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to SM.
- 10 I am grateful to Dr J. C. Q. Stewart who first alerted me to the pun on 'tale'.
- 11 Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 247.
- 12 George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 517. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to R.
- 13 Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, p. 244.
- 14 See interview with Margaret Thatcher in *Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987.
- 15 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, pp. 272, 282, 290.
- 16 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 144–5, italics in original.
- 17 James Sully's memoir of Eliot in *My Life and Friends: A Psychologist's Memoirs* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1918), p. 264, mentions her familiarity with Schopenhauer.
- 18 See K. M. Newton, *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), pp. 82–3.

- 19 Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 214.  
 20 Bernard J. Paris, 'George Eliot's Unpublished Poetry', *Studies in Philology*, 56 (1959), 541–2.

## Chapter 10: The post-colonial critique of Eliot: Is Edward Said right about *Daniel Deronda*?

- 1 See interview with Anderson. Available at <http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?...amandaanderson> [accessed 25 July 2011].
- 2 Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 379.
- 3 Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, p. 430.
- 4 For examples of post-colonial-influenced readings of *Daniel Deronda*, see Katherine Bailey Linehan, 'Mixed Politics: The Critique of Imperialism in *Daniel Deronda*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 34 (1992), 323–46; Carolyn Lesjak, 'Labours of a Modern Storyteller: George Eliot and the Cultural Project of "Nationhood" in *Daniel Deronda*', in *Victorian Identities: Social and Cultural Formations in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, eds Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 25–42; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996); Susan Meyer, "'Safely to Their Own Borders": Proto-Zionism, Feminism, and Nationalism in *Daniel Deronda*', *ELH*, 60 (1993), 733–58; Marc E. Wohlfarth, '*Daniel Deronda* and the Politics of Nationalism', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 53 (1998), 188–210. For a critical discussion of Said and post-colonial interpretation generally see Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and British Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially pp. 114–23.
- 5 *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Rignall, p. 84.
- 6 Edward W. Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', first published in 1979, reprinted in *The Question of Palestine* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 70.
- 7 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 66.
- 8 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 67.
- 9 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 81.
- 10 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 78.
- 11 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 63.
- 12 Another sign that Eliot creates some distance between herself and Mordecai is that he is critical of Spinoza – though recognizing that he supported Jewish nationhood – for not having 'a faithful Jewish heart' (*DD*, 457). Eliot's translation of both Spinoza's *Ethics* and his *Tractatus* testifies to her intellectual admiration for the philosopher. For a critique from a different point of view of the identification of Eliot's views with those of Mordecai, see Amanda Anderson's chapter on *Daniel Deronda* in her book *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*.
- 13 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', p. 68.
- 14 Henry, *George Eliot and British Imperialism*, p. 117.
- 15 Said, 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', pp. 65–6.
- 16 Nestor, *George Eliot*, p. 154.
- 17 Bernard Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 139. Other critics who take this view are Meyer, Wohlfarth, Deirdre David in *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).



## Chapter 11: Eliot and racism: How should one read ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’?

- 1 Said, ‘Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims’, p. 65.
- 2 Sandor Gilman, ‘Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 239.
- 3 Linehan, ‘Mixed Politics’, p. 339.
- 4 Lesjak, ‘Labours of a Modern Storyteller’, p. 32.
- 5 See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 826.
- 6 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1901) (Reprint of 2nd edition of 1874), pp. 97, 913.
- 7 For a fuller discussion of this issue, see K. M. Newton, ‘George Eliot and the Bushmen’, *Notes and Queries*, 55 (2008), 45–6.
- 8 Nancy Henry, ‘Introduction’ to George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Nancy Henry (London: Pickering, 1994), pp. ix, xviii.
- 9 Meyer, ‘Safely to Their Own Borders’, p. 754.
- 10 Sally Shuttleworth, review of Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and British Imperialism*, in *Notes and Queries*, 52 (2005), 136.
- 11 Wohlfarth, ‘*Daniel Deronda* and the Politics of Nationalism’, p. 210.
- 12 Cheyette, *Constructions of ‘the Jew’ in English Literature and Society*, p. 44.
- 13 Meyer, ‘Safely to Their Own Borders’, p. 750.
- 14 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, first published 1869 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 141.
- 15 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 38.
- 16 Meyer, ‘Safely to Their Own Borders’, p. 754.
- 17 This position should not necessarily be seen as nostalgic, ideologically conservative or irrelevant in modern multicultural Britain, as major British cultural theorist Stuart Hall appears to have some sympathy with it:

As academic Stuart Hall has put it, heritage ‘is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory’. The steady collation of incidents and turning points into a collective narrative allows countries to ‘construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding “national story”’. (*The [London] Observer*, 14 January 2007, p. 25)

- 18 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 20.
- 19 T. S. Eliot claims, ‘the first suspicion of heresy creeps in with a writer who, at her best, has a much profounder moral insight than these [Austen, Dickens, Thackeray] ... we must respect her for being a serious moralist, but deplore her individualistic morals’ (T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, p. 54.)
- 20 See the discussion of Eliot and Darwinism in Chapter 1 of this study.
- 21 Meyer, ‘Safely to Their Own Borders’, p. 746.
- 22 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 272.
- 23 Meyer, ‘Safely to Their Own Borders’, p. 750.

## Chapter 12: Eliot and Derrida: An elective affinity?

\*‘This affinity is sufficiently striking in the case of alkalis and acids which, although they are mutually antithetical, and perhaps precisely because they are so, most

- decidedly seek and embrace one another, modify one another, and together form a new substance.' J. W. von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 52–3.
- 1 Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, pp. 121, 123.
  - 2 MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, p. 15. See also Belsey's discussion of Eliot in *Critical Practice*.
  - 3 Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 162.
  - 4 See, for example, Miller, 'Narrative and History', pp. 455–73 and 'Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Buckley, pp. 125–45; and Neil Hertz, 'Recognizing Casaubon', *Glyph*, 6 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 22–41.
  - 5 See, for example, Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
  - 6 *Essays*, ed. Pinney, p. 162.
  - 7 See *Life. After. Theory*, eds Michael Payne and John Schad (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 111–12.
  - 8 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 88–9.
  - 9 Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, pp. 209–10.
  - 10 Linehan, 'Mixed Politics', pp. 325, 327.
  - 11 Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, p. 134.
  - 12 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).
  - 13 Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 337. Emphasis in original.
  - 14 Derrida discusses undecidability in several texts, for example in 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London, 1999), pp. 66–8.
  - 15 Derrida indicates awareness of this issue in discussing how Arabic was viewed as 'the language of the other' in Algeria, but goes on to say, 'I cannot analyse this politics of language head-on and I would not like to make too easy use of the world [sic] "colonialism". All culture is originarily colonial.' See *Monolingualism of the Other or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 20, 37, 39.
  - 16 Said, *The Question of Palestine*, p. 81. See discussion of Said in Chapter 11.
  - 17 Derrida, 'Hospitality', pp. 67–8.
  - 18 See especially Linehan, 'Mixed Politics'; Meyer, 'Safely to Their Own Borders'; and Lesjak, 'Labours of a Modern Storyteller'.
  - 19 Deronda remarks that it is 'only two centuries since a vessel carried over the ocean the beginning of the great North American nation' (*DD*, 458).
  - 20 It has been argued, however, that Eliot allowed her virtual stepsons to emigrate to southern Africa as colonists and that this shows support for both colonization and colonialism. However, there is clear evidence that this was done with little enthusiasm and was very much the last resort as many other possibilities had been tried with the boys and failed. See the discussion of this in Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and British Imperialism*.
  - 21 See Joseph Massad, 'The Legacy of Jean-Paul Sartre'. Available at <http://www.campus-watch.org/article/id/1777> [accessed 25 July 2011].

- 22 John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 13.
- 23 Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp. 114–15. Emphasis in original.
- 24 Derrida, ‘Hospitality’, p. 70.
- 25 Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), p. ix (from preface by translators).
- 26 Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 12
- 27 Derrida, ‘Hospitality’, pp. 69, 71.
- 28 Derrida, ‘Hospitality’, p. 72.
- 29 On Eliot and the messianic, see Nurbhai and Newton, *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels*, especially Chapter 9.
- 30 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 59.
- 31 Peter Fenves (ed.), *Raiding the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 164–6. Emphasis in original.
- 32 A Jewish reviewer of *Daniel Deronda*, James Picciotto, wrote in 1876,

However, the dreams of Mordecai and Daniel Deronda are likely to remain dreams for the present. Not only are there no signs of their speedy realisation, but it is not at all sure that such a consummation is desired by the Hebrew nation ... It is to be feared that notwithstanding all the efforts of Daniel Deronda and of real living philanthropists, it will be long before Palestine will cease to be, in the passionate language of Mordecai, ‘a place for saintly beggary to await death in loathsome idleness’.

*George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 416.

- 33 *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Carroll, p. 377.
- 34 Jacques Derrida, ‘Circumfession’, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 155.
- 35 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 89–90. Emphasis in original.
- 36 Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 25.
- 37 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, p. 69. Emphasis in original.
- 38 Derrida, ‘Hospitality’, p. 67.
- 39 The opening of Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* states, ‘Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do.’ Eliot would have been aware of J. S. Mill’s criticism of this aspect of Bentham’s utilitarianism.
- 40 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 75.
- 41 Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on Emmanuel Levinas’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 125.
- 42 Graham, *The Creed of Science*, p. 380. Graham and also Eliot’s critique of such an application of Darwinism to the human world are more fully discussed in Chapter 1.
- 43 Anger, ‘George Eliot and Philosophy’, p. 80. Emphasis in original.

### Chapter 13: The role of luck in the art, ethics and politics of *Daniel Deronda*

- 1 See, for example, David R. Carroll, 'The Unity of *Daniel Deronda*', *Essays in Criticism*, 9 (1959), 369–80, and also his chapter on the novel in his book *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations*.
- 2 Nestor, *George Eliot*, p. 142.
- 3 See Chapters 10 and 11 of this study.
- 4 In *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Alexander Welsh notes the 'increased reference to consciousness' and 'the increased depth and range of consciousness' (p. 306) in *Daniel Deronda*.
- 5 Nestor, *Critical Issues*, pp. 146, 150.
- 6 Here I am in disagreement with Amanda Anderson: 'Mirah, drawn in contrast to both Gwendolen and Leonora, represents ... ideal femininity'. See her essay on *Daniel Deronda* in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*, p. 139.
- 7 Roberts, *George Eliot*, p. 196.
- 8 Wilfred Stone, 'The Play of Chance and Ego in *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 53 (1998), 27.
- 9 Alexander Welsh, for example, devotes a chapter of *George Eliot and Blackmail* to Grandcourt's drowning and Gwendolen's state of mind before and after it, but Deronda is not seen as playing a significant part in the scene between him and Gwendolen: 'He requires no instruction in moral matters and suffers no moral recognition' (*DD*, 299). For David Carroll, Deronda in this scene acts quite selflessly to help Gwendolen overcome her traumatic experience: 'her remorse and conviction of guilt is the ground for not accepting the narrative [that she in effect killed Grandcourt]. She is innocent because she insists she is guilty. The hermeneutic of suspicion [significantly not applied to Deronda] prepares the way for the hermeneutic of restoration' (*George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 309).
- 10 Nestor, *Critical Issues*, p. 150.
- 11 Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p. 160. Even George Levine, one of Eliot's major critics, refers to Deronda's 'almost Christlike selflessness'. See his essay 'The Hero as Dilettante: *Middlemarch* and *Nostromo*', in *George Eliot*, ed. Smith, p. 164.
- 12 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingus (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- 13 Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*. For a discussion of Levinas and Derrida in regard to ethics, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).
- 14 See Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', in *Questioning Ethics*, eds Kearney and Dooley, 22, p. 66.
- 15 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 195–96. It can be argued that Eliot's Hegel-influenced essay 'The Antigone and Its Moral' is very relevant to Williams's view of the ethical and the concept of 'moral luck' since it associates any action, even the most apparently worthy, with risk and unpredictability: 'Reformers, martyrs, revolutionists, are never fighting against evil only; they are also placing themselves in opposition to a good – to a valid principle which cannot be infringed without harm. Resist the payment of ship-money, you bring on civil war ... cultivate a new region of the earth, and you exterminate a race of men ... a man must not only dare to be right, he must dare to be wrong' (*Essays*, ed. Pinney, pp. 264–5). This is pertinent not only to Deronda but also to Eliot herself in publishing a text promoting proto-Zionism, as this chapter will go on to suggest.

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- 16 Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 38. See also Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
  - 17 Nestor, *Critical Issues*, p. 150.
  - 18 Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, pp. 123–4.
  - 19 Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, pp. 134–5.
  - 20 Significantly Herder thought it might be necessary to restore a Jewish nation in the Middle East. See Russell Arben Fox, *Religious Particularism and Religious Pluralism in Herder's Humanität*, pp. 19–22. Available at <http://www.freewebs.com/mmfrac/PDF/HerderReligion.pdf> [accessed 25 July 2011].
  - 21 Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, p. 134. For further discussion of Anderson's view of the representation of Deronda and Mordecai, see Jules Law, 'Transparency and Epistemology in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 67 (2007), 250–77.
  - 22 For Derrida and messianism, see his *Specters of Marx*.

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