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BOOK REVIEW

By Richard Freadman

DANIEL DERONDA

The Clarendon Edition of the Novels of George Eliot
Edited by Graham Handley

In writing Daniel Deronda George Eliot hoped 'to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs'. Typically, her aspiration was suffused with doubt. She wished the novel to be seen as an integrated work of art but worried about its aesthetic reception; and she feared that the 'Jewish element' would elicit an unenthusiastic response. On both counts her apprehensiveness has been proven prophetic. Daniel Deronda remains one of the most controversial of the great English novels, its extraordinary fusion of realist and mystical, 'Jewish' and 'non-Jewish' elements, a puzzle to each new generation of readers.

Some of the best-known assessments of the novel have been painfully divided. Henry James's classic "Daniel: A Conversation" echoes George Eliot's anxiety on both counts. It pronounces the Jewish part "cold" and the narrative structure fragmented and uneven. Moreover, its very format - a fictional dialogue between readers - implicitly levels at George Eliot's novel the most radical of criticisms: James uses his own fictional medium to expose what he takes to be the communicative limitations of George Eliot's method. Pulcheria's
contribution to the conversation reveals that, however heroic, Daniel Deronda has not assuaged her prejudices. In this instance at least, a sympathetic vision of 'human claims' has not possessed the reader.

Leavis's famous suggestion that the novel be submitted to surgical intervention and re-titled Gwendolen Harleth is less subtle than James's account but echoes some of its reservations. Leavis was, of course, later to amend his assessment, but the image of an almost culpably flawed masterpiece has prevailed in many quarters.

Inevitably, circumstances have shaped other – sometimes more recent – readings. For some Daniel Deronda has taken on a new importance after Hitler. In more specifically 'literary' terms, the New Criticism gave added impetus to the old debate about aesthetic unity and disunity. Again, feminism has directed renewed attention to the anguished and equivocal figure of Gwendolen. Does she emerge a woman capable of dignified and self-determining choices, or is she consigned to a life of insipid compromise? The on-going interest in Daniel Deronda is reflected in two of the most important recent studies to focus on George Eliot. Gillian Beer's masterly Darwin's Plots considers the novel's interest in social typologies and its conflicted notion of genetic Judaism (long prior to Daniel Deronda George Eliot had, of course, translated both Feuerbach and Spinoza); and Sally Shuttleworth's George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science is particularly interesting on the divergence between the empirical and extra-empirical features of the novel's epistemology.
Thus far critics have generally depended upon the Cabinet Edition of the novel as their text, though some have used Barbara Hardy's more readily accessible Penguin edition (also based on the Cabinet text). Now, however, the Clarendon Edition of the novels, under the General Editorship of G.S. Haight, has given us what promises to be the standard text for the foreseeable future. Graham Handley's splendid edition of Daniel Deronda is an immensely welcome new resource for those interested in the novel, not least those who have puzzled over the sometimes fiendishly obscure violet ink manuscript in the British Museum.

The edition follows the general format established in the two volumes already to have appeared in the Clarendon series, Professor Haight's edition of The Mill on the Floss and Fred C. Thomson's one of Felix Holt. Dr. Handley begins with an account of the novel's creative evolution; then follows a description of the manuscript, a section on expansions and interpolations, another on contractions and a further one on changes in sequence. Dr. Handley then gives details of the proofs, of publication and of the text for the present edition. A list of substantive emendations is followed by bibliographical descriptions of various editions of the novel. A sample manuscript page precedes the text itself. Dr. Handley's presentation of these indispensable materials maintains the fine standard already established in the Clarendon series. Students of Daniel Deronda will appreciate the uncluttered but scrupulous attention to detail and the elegant conciseness of Dr. Handley's account. At no stage does it deflect attention from matters of strict textual relevance.
One assumes that Dr. Handley, who has elsewhere written at length about the novel, has in some respects been restricted by the sheer scale of the undertaking. His preliminary discussion is understandably less extended than Thomson's and throughout he permits himself only occasional references to critical discussions of *Daniel Deronda*. He does, however, gloss innumerable points of Judaic and more general literary interest and this edition will ideally complement 'background' studies by Kaufmann, Knoepflmacher, Baker and others.

Dr. Handley takes as his copy-text for the Clarendon Edition the Eight Part (Book) Edition of February – September, 1876. He explains this choice thus:

> My decision to use 1 (the 1876 edition) as the copy-text was based on the existence of the manuscript (MS) and the proofs... for the Part issue; although they are incomplete and abound in literal errors, these proofs show the alterations and corrections from MS and are therefore the most important evidence in establishing the text.

Since Cabinet Edition revisions are also included (in footnotes), a very full image of the novel's creative evolution emerges.

Each reader will find his or her particular points of interest in the authorial alterations and deletions Dr. Handley educes. (His discussion of expansions and deletions is also informative in this respect.) For this reader many of the most revealing deletions and alterations concern Gwendolen – her egoism, her anxiety, oblique references to her sexuality, the
shock of her recognition about Grandcourt, even the complex psychic mechanisms by which she suppresses or delays recognitions. Passages about Deronda's sense of indecision and destiny are also obviously carefully pondered and re-phrased. Then there are details of a more formal kind, especially where the novel's complex narrative commentary has been pruned or its narrative sequence adjusted. Countless minor details shed further and fascinating light on George Eliot's creative method.

Graham Handley's edition is propitiously timed, and not just for readers of George Eliot. It arrives at a time, after all, when the novel generally is much under discussion and in which various critical specialisms – structuralism, poststructuralism, varieties of Marxism – are seeking to qualify or dispute its 'traditional' status. Are novels in fact distinct narrative forms from (say) history? How valid are the truth claims they make? Are their images of human personality anything other than social – some claim ideological – constructs? What role are we to ascribe to the author in artistic creation? Such questions increasingly impinge upon contemporary critical accounts of earlier writers, George Eliot among them. Novels like Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda have attracted structuralist, deconstructive and Marxist readings in addition to more traditional forms of commentary. No doubt George Eliot encourages such readings because she so often reflects upon her own artistic practice; but also because she anticipates many of the questions contemporary theorists are now asking. Daniel Deronda is, after all, massively concerned with the status of different forms of narrative, with the status of different forms of narrative, with the nature of language, with widely divergent images of human personality and with problems of origin and authority. Thus does it strike a distinctly
modern chord, despite its esoteric learning and its apparent remoteness.

Graham Handley's edition does not, of course, broach questions of contemporary literary theory. It has no call to. But its precise and sympathetic presentation of a great novel's evolution can only enhance our understanding of fiction more generally and of its range of report. More specifically, it deepens one's appreciation of one of the great spiritual quest novels in English. George Eliot readers and others will find the Clarendon Daniel Deronda immensely rewarding.