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MOVING BEYOND SIGNS: THE CRISIS OF LANGUAGE IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

By Ceri Hunter

It is no critical initiative to point out that George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) plays with the premises of realist narrative art.¹ Previous readings have, however, tended to engage only tangentially with the way in which the novel scrutinises the use of language.² This omission of linguistic context is curious, given that *Daniel Deronda* is set during a decade which placed the Victorian ruling classes' confidence in the English language under strain. The 1860s teemed with words. There were more English speakers than ever before, owing to population increase and dispersal. The English language was democratised by the 1867 reform bill, which enfranchised nearly a million new voices, and by the proliferation of local newspapers following the repeal of stamp duty and the abolition of tax on paper. It was globalised by the electric telegraph and the laying of the Atlantic Cable.³ This paper will argue that *Daniel Deronda* enacts and accommodates resultant anxieties about the use of language as a conceptual tool.

I

An early review by Henry James famously praises the narrative threads of *Daniel Deronda* as 'long electric wires capable of transmitting messages from mysterious regions.'⁴ James had, of course, borrowed this allusion to the new technology of communication from textual details in the novel itself. For example, when Gwendolen Harleth decides to join the Langen family at Dover, she departs immediately, in the knowledge that a message sent by telegraph will reach them before she does.⁵ The telegraphic cable forms Sir Hugo Mallinger's contribution to the conversation on the return journey from Genoa (p. 762). Mr Grandcourt, meanwhile, learns of world events 'through the wire of his rental' and 'the best newspaper columns' from the splendid isolation of Ryelands (p. 584). The English characters of *Daniel Deronda* move in a world where the insularity of their society is constantly lapped by words moving faster and further than ever before.

The telegraph, and the new technical terms associated with it, furnished Eliot with a metaphor for social intercourse. When the minor character, Lady Flora Hollis, discovers that Gwendolen has fled abroad, her desire to gossip is described using language which compares her to a telegraphic cable: she is 'charged with news' and eager to 'electrify' Grandcourt (p.158). Galvanising Grandcourt appears to be Lady Flora's main function. Similarly Mr Vandernoodt, who persists in punctuating the novel, seems to have been created solely to mediate the relationship between the central protagonists, Gwendolen and Deronda. At Leubronn, Gwendolen presses Vandernoodt to tell her who Deronda is. He informs her that he is "reported" to be Sir Hugo Mallinger's illegitimate son (p.13). He resurfaces at Diplow, taking Deronda aside for 'a little gossip' to reveal the details of Grandcourt's relationship with Gwendolen (p. 432). Vandernoodt is functioning as a telegraphic key, controlling what each knows about the other's life.

The information imparted by Vandernoodt threatens to make Deronda and Gwendolen social

pariahs. The act of gossiping produces patterns of triangulation between characters, in which one character is necessarily an outsider. Thus Eliot demonstrates how words are the currency of a society which defines itself through exclusion. Her characters show awareness of the power of gossip. Mr Gascoigne, for example, accepts that his niece is open to other people's "language", but sees it as her duty to ensure that their talk about her doesn't have an unpleasant "tone" (p. 77). One of Mrs Arrowpoint's concerns for her daughter in marrying the musician Klesmer is that she will become a "public fable" (p. 246).

"Mr Vandernoedt, you know everybody," Gwendolen flatters him (p. 13). However, one of the problems exposed by *Daniel Deronda* is the extent to which language can 'know' a character. This problem finds its paradigm in the character of Deronda, whose dual inheritance defeats the social discourse of polite society. Simultaneously insider and outsider, both English gentleman and Jew, he cannot be easily described using the available terms. Sir Hugo articulates his anomalous status in a language of labelling: "you would not ticket him off easily" (p. 322). This passage was selected for attention by an early review appearing in *The Spectator*. For the reviewer, Sir Hugo's inability to classify Deronda is indicative of weakness of characterisation: Eliot's character becomes 'a bit of a problem' for her, and she is 'not able quite to find the right word' to describe him.⁶ In fact, the reviewer misses Eliot's intention and his misinterpretation is symptomatic of exactly that reluctance to move beyond the parameters of codification which her novel highlights.

Deronda's affinity with the Hebrew language becomes a convenient strategy by which to accommodate his 'otherness' within the novel. More disconcerting, however, is the figure of Grandcourt, who, despite being the most English of English gentlemen, also resists description. Eliot's portrait of him concludes with a metafictional comment on the act of description itself: 'We recognise the alphabet, we are not sure of the language.' (p. 111). Using this linguistic metaphor, Eliot shows how a person's character cannot necessarily be correctly constructed from the signs they choose to display. The reader is privileged because this insight warns us that Grandcourt has both a public and a private character, an insight developed by the use of free indirect discourse and by scenes from which Gwendolen is absent. Gwendolen's family is not so privileged. Mr Gascoigne trusts in a stable correlation between signifier and signified, adducing from "the way Mr Grandcourt has acted and spoken" that he will behave with "liberality" as a husband (p. 309). It is not until he learns the contents of Grandcourt's will that he realises his mistake. His reaction is to be 'deeply hurt' and to fall prey to 'retrospective thoughts,' re-evaluating the different signs he has received (p. 757). The characters of *Daniel Deronda* have fallen down the rabbit-hole of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), into a landscape where 'the words did not come the same as they used to do.'⁷

II

Feminist criticism of the novel has drawn attention to the difficulties of classifying Gwendolen: 'In Gwendolen, George Eliot creates a new kind of heroine, neither Antigone nor Madonna.'⁸ Attention has been paid to the role of the novel's surveillance motif, established in the opening casino scene, in highlighting the categorisation of women.⁹ Although this scene does place Deronda as spectator, the opening sentence also makes his attempt to classify a process of semantics. 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' Deronda asks himself (p. 7). He is seeking to

frame his personal response to Gwendolen within a word with a socially agreed value, and the fascination exerted by Gwendolen springs from this difficulty of describing her.

A fundamental difference between Deronda and Gwendolen is that, whilst Deronda cannot be categorised, Gwendolen will not allow others to categorise her. She launches her attempt to be different from 'ordinary young ladies' through the manipulation of language (p. 53). Gwendolen's loquacity in contrast to her sisters, 'Bertha and Fanny the whisperers, and Isabel the listener,' sets her apart as a wild card in a society which had clear rules about how women should speak (p. 310).¹⁰ The association which Gwendolen makes between controlling language and asserting one's independence is expressed in her fear that, as a prospective governess, 'it was at her peril that she was to look, speak or be silent' (p. 271). She believes that she can control language: "'I don't see why it is hard to call things by their right names and put them in their proper places'" (p. 29). Having made this assumption, Gwendolen then sets out to defy society by calling things by their wrong names and putting them in their wrong places.

The chapter in which Gwendolen is received at Quetcham for the first time illustrates her use of evasive language to negotiate society. Gwendolen's conversation with Mrs Arrowpoint shows her divorcing tone from form, managing to be derogatory whilst sounding polite. She succeeds in destabilising the congruence between language and meaning, as observed by Mrs Arrowpoint in her estimation of Gwendolen as 'double.' (p. 51). Gwendolen's nonsense serves as a strategy to keep unwanted suitors at bay. For example, her "'equivocal praise'" allows her both to encourage and to insult Clintock, and she also succeeds in making a refusal to read a poem he offers her sound like an acceptance (pp. 50-1). She uses the same tactic to fend off the unwanted attentions of her cousin Rex, outlining her intention not to marry using 'words born on her lips', whilst 'at a loss to give an answer of deeper origin' (p. 70). Again, Gwendolen is surviving on a disjunction between language and meaning.

The courtship between Grandcourt and Gwendolen affords the reader a certain amount of satisfaction because Grandcourt proves her verbal match. His technique in wooing Gwendolen is to force her to re-attach meaning to her words. This tactic emerges in their first conversation, when his pauses prompt Gwendolen's concerns about 'the various degrees and modes of opinion about herself that might be entertained by Grandcourt.' He thus succeeds in making her 'less mistress of herself than usual' (p. 112). The tension of this conversation was appreciated by John Blackwood, who likened it to a 'game'.¹¹ At Diplo, Grandcourt persistently interrogates Gwendolen and feeds her with possible answers so that her options of linguistic trickery are limited. Her only method of salvaging control is to terminate the conversation on the pretext of dropping her whip, a not too subtle emblem of her loss of mastery (p. 135). Grandcourt employs this method again in the proposal scene, to corner Gwendolen into accepting him. When Gwendolen hesitates to answer his direct proposal, he tricks her by pre-empting her with a negative response which she is forced to refute. However, Gwendolen remains unaware of the magnitude of her reply: 'Her "yes" entailed so little at this moment, that there was nothing to screen the reversal of her gloomy prospects...' (p. 303). She fails to realise that Grandcourt has pinned her down verbally, thinking herself to be 'in the woman's paradise where all her nonsense is adorable.' (p. 304).

Grandcourt's subjection of Gwendolen within their marriage results, however, not from his words, but from the words Lydia Glasher encloses with the diamonds: 'With the reading of that letter had begun her husband's empire of fear' (p. 425). Lydia, the mistress, shut away from society at Gadsmere, can only state her case through the clandestine meeting at the Whispering Stones and through this furtive letter (p. 152). Her words are unlicensed and uncontrollable, and threaten to undo the socially sanctioned bond between man and wife. However the precise word which terrorises Gwendolen is, in fact, her own. The haunting power of Lydia's letter lies in taking Gwendolen's language and using it against her. "'You have broken your word to her,'" she writes, reminding Gwendolen of her promise not to marry Grandcourt (p. 358).

The horror of Gwendolen's plight breeds in this loss of control of her word. Her habit of playing fast and loose with language has come back to haunt her. Her change of circumstances may have prompted her to renege on her promise to Lydia, but she is unable to un-say the word which Lydia has taken as binding. The word has greater power than Gwendolen, who has become a defeated Humpty Dumpty.¹² Gwendolen's plight mirrors contemporary developments in linguistic science. It was in the 1860s that Max Müller published his *Lectures on the Science of Language*, appreciated by Eliot as a 'great and delightful book'.¹³ Müller's work, which popularised new developments in scientific philology, had brought to the Victorian public the idea that language could operate independently of man.¹⁴ This concept is the source of the anthropomorphic imagery with which Eliot figures Gwendolen's plight: 'The words had nestled their venomous life within her, and stirred continually the vision of the scene at the Whispering Stones.' (p. 424). The words have become parasites, inhabiting Gwendolen's body and taking over her mind. They infect the diamonds: 'The words of the bad dream crawled about the diamonds still, but only for her: to others they were brilliants that suited her perfectly...' (p. 428). To Gwendolen, the diamonds connote corruption and entrapment; to the rest of society they connote prosperity and happiness. A phenomenal object now has a plurality of meanings, leaving Gwendolen isolated in her private misery.

III

If words have no stable value, how are we to communicate? This is the genie which *Daniel Deronda* lets loose from the bottle. In many respects, it is a novel not about communication, but about the failure to communicate. Again and again, the characters misunderstand one another. For example, when Mirah reassures Hans Meyrick that he has not offended her, Hans interprets her reassurance as proof of stronger attachment than friendship. Eliot attributes the misunderstanding to Hans: 'How could the rose help it when several bees in succession took its sweet odour as a sign of personal attachment?' (p. 490). It is not until Mirah is goaded by Hans's suggestion that Deronda loves Gwendolen, that he becomes aware of 'a new perception, and with it the unpleasant sense that he was a dolt not to have had it before' (p. 729). Hans has been investing Mirah's words with meaning favourable to himself. Gwendolen is subject to a similar epiphany in the scene when Deronda reveals that he is Jewish and about to emigrate with Mirah. She acknowledges that she has failed to listen to him in her final letter: '*I only thought of myself, and I made you grieve*' (p. 810).

Eliot describes Deronda's and Gwendolen's failed communication as 'a difference of native language', a linguistic metaphor which draws on the differences between English and Hebrew,

Deronda's native language as a Jew. When Deronda is finally united with the Jewish Mirah, it is tempting to read the novel as chipping away at Jacob Grimm's (1851) description of English as 'a language of the world... destined to reign in the future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe.'¹⁵ A refusal to privilege English over Hebrew appears as the impetus behind Mordecai's impassioned refusal to 'silence the beliefs which are the mother-tongue of my soul and speak with the rote-learned language of a system...' (p. 502). Nineteenth-century comparative philology revered Hebrew as the Adamic language, thus it is possible to infer that Eliot is presenting it as a more 'true' method of communication. However, this interpretation is complicated by the scene in which Mordecai seeks to teach young Jacob Cohen the 'unintelligible words' of Hebrew verses:

'My words may rule him some day. Their meaning may flash out on him. It is so with a nation – after many days.' (p. 476)

Mordecai here appears no better than Gwendolen, believing that his words have a stable meaning which he can govern, and seeking to use language as a method of control.¹⁶ The reader draws comic satisfaction from Jacob's unintentional subversion of his intention, when he links the poems with London dialect to produce his own chatter (p. 569).

Deronda's and Mirah's affinity is grounded not in Hebrew, but in a shared transcendence of language. When Deronda visits the synagogue at Frankfurt, he is moved not by the Hebrew, but by 'that strongest effect of chanted liturgies which is independent of detailed verbal meaning...' (p. 367). Deronda is experiencing a form of communication which is beyond words. A defining moment in his blossoming relationship with Mirah is reached when she sings for him the Hebrew hymn which her mother once sung to her. She warns him: "I don't sing real words – only here and there a syllable like hers – the rest is lisping." The rendition has a 'sweeter, more cooing tenderness' than her other songs, and she tells Deronda that she would always sing the lisped syllables, even were she to discover the real lyrics. Mirah's sounds have more value than the real words because they are expressive of the love she has experienced, and she now passes that love on to Deronda. He finds the song "'full of meaning,'" because meaning is located not in words, but in "'the influence of voices'" (p. 374). Mirah and Deronda have achieved pre-linguistic contact and, working in the wake of Cixous, it is difficult to resist reading 'a challenging of this solidarity of logocentrism and phallogocentrism' into this episode, in which the nexus of communication is maternal love.¹⁷

Deronda's proposal to Mirah is differentiated from Grandcourt's to Gwendolen because, whilst the latter proposal is a complicated exchange of language, the former is distinguished by the lack of speech:

...she could say nothing – she could only lift up her lips to his and just kiss them, as if that were the simplest 'yes'. They stood then, only looking at each other – too happy to move, meeting so fully in their new consciousness that all signs would have seemed to throw them further apart, till Mirah said in a whisper: 'Let us go and comfort Ezra.' (p. 792)

The lovers are portrayed as being so in unison that they have no need of language to communicate. Verbal language is superseded by a moment of spiritual fusion. In a vocabulary

seemingly prescient of Saussurean linguistics, ‘signs’ are discarded; we are asked to believe that their love is such that they reach the signified without the signifier. When Mirah does speak, it is a barely audible utterance, so as not to intrude upon the ethereal beauty of the scene. This ‘no’ to language becomes *Daniel Deronda*’s lasting ‘yes’, and transforms the turbulent linguistic context in which it was written from a corrosive agent to a healing balm.

Notes

- 1 Sarah Gates, “‘A Difference of Native Language’”: Gender, Genre and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*, *English Literary History*, 68 (Fall 2001), 699-724. Gates argues that the novel is a site of confluence for the epic and tragic traditions. Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Beer argues that Eliot disturbs narrative sequence in *Daniel Deronda*.
- 2 Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 182-6. Although Shuttleworth examines the relationship between language and meaning, she locates it in the context of organic theory rather than of linguistic science and communication *per se*. David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations, A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 3-4, 273, 276. Carroll discusses Eliot’s novels as exemplifying a Victorian crisis in interpretation, but situates this crisis in the broader field of hermeneutics, rather than linguistics.
- 3 Richard W. Bailey, *Nineteenth-Century English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 4, 16, 19, 26.
- 4 David Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 362.
- 5 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 154. All further references to this edition will be given in the body of the text.
- 6 Lawrence Lerner and John Holstrom (eds), *George Eliot and her Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), p. 129.
- 7 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 19.
- 8 Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 223.
- 9 Eileen Sypher, ‘Resisting Gwendolen’s “Subjection”’: *Daniel Deronda*’s Proto-Feminism’, *Studies in the Novel*, 28 (Winter, 1996), 506-524.
- 10 Lynda Mugglestone, ‘Talking Proper’, *The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Chapter Four examines the importance of speaking ‘properly’ in the social construction of the lady.
- 11 Lawrence Lerner and John Holstrom (eds.), *George Eliot and her Readers, A Selection of Contemporary Reviews* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), p. 124.

- 12 Lewis Carroll, *Through The Looking-Glass*, p. 186: ““When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.””
- 13 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), IV, 8.
- 14 Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: University Press: Princeton, 1986), pp. 61-3.
- 15 Bailey, *Nineteenth-Century English*, p. 16.
- 16 Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 3, 114. Henry argues that it is anachronistic to read into *Daniel Deronda* a criticism of imperialism and Zionism. Whilst I agree with Henry, this incident does indicate that a relativistic examination of the human instinct to control is present in the text.
- 17 Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties,’ in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory, A Reader* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), p. 266.