

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1994

Metafiction and Metaphor: Daniel Deronda as Golem

Saleel Nurbhai

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Nurbhai, Saleel, "Metafiction and Metaphor: Daniel Deronda as Golem" (1994). *The George Eliot Review*. 239.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/239>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Saleel Nurbhai
**METAFICTION AND METAPHOR: *DANIEL DERONDA* AS
GOLEM**

A criticism of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, from Henry James onwards, is that it is a novel of two halves: the realist Gwendolen half, and the visionary Mordecai half. These two are regarded as unable to mesh, and thus weaken the novel in structure and purpose. When examining the novel and a contextual interpretation of the Jewish myth of the *golem*, however, this bifurcation seems intentional; more than that, it is a metafictional rendering of the theme in the novel's structure.

The term *golem* is central to mythical creation in Judaism. It means an unformed mass. Before he is given shape, Adam is *golem*; before he receives the inspiring breath of God, Adam is also *golem*. The ambiguity of the term presents it as a metaphor for shapelessness. Despite this – perhaps because of it – *golem* occupies an important symbolic position in the history of Judaism. As with most myths its origins were in ritual practice; in its subsequent manifestations *golem* making has been used as proof of human imitation of the divine, and sometimes regarded as transgression into the occult. Most popular has been its reception in folk legend, where it has been attributed to the wonder-working of Elijah of Chelm, and the Faustian Yehuda Loew of Prague. In literature it has served as a symbol for 'the unreckoned, unformed man; the Jewish people; the working class aspiring for its liberation.'¹ In *Daniel Deronda* Deronda is an unformed man whose growth into definition becomes a metaphor for cohesion in and of the novel.

In the notes George Eliot made in preparation for writing *Daniel Deronda*, she makes numerous references to the *Sefer Yetzirah* ('Yecira or Jetzirah' as she writes it), the Kabbalah 'Book of Creation'. Among these are specific notes concerning the artificial creation of life: the legend of Hanina and Oshaya is referred to;² more striking is the following: 'The ancient Sorcerer Ankebuta declares in his work on artificial productions, that he created a man and shows how he did it; but he confesses that the man without reason, could not sit but simply closed his eyes.'³ She was certainly aware of *golem*-making when she wrote the novel; it becomes apparent from an examination of the text that she used various interpretations of – and kabbalistic ideas related to – the *golem* in order to shape the hero and the novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Aspects of the *golem* discernible in *Deronda* are: lack of definition; lack of essence; lack of abode; and lack of speech.

Deronda moves from a creature without soul and clear form to a complete being. His lack of soul is ignorance of his Jewish heritage, lack of shape his inability to identify with any sense of destiny: 'Other men, he thought, had a more definite place and duties'.⁴ Until he is able to locate himself in the Jewish or Gentile worlds in the novel, Deronda will remain without shape. At one point in his wanderings in Europe, Deronda reflects that he cannot shape himself, and needs animation from within and direction from without: '... what he most longed for was either some external event, or some inward light that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy' (*DD*, p.272). This has

not been forthcoming from the world of the Mallingers, where he feels he does not fit: 'there was something about his birth which threw him out from the class of gentlemen to which the baronet belonged' (DD, p.125). When Sir Hugo does attempt to shape Deronda after his own image – 'I wish you to have the education of an English gentleman. Cambridge I mean you to go to; it was my own university' (DD, p.127) – it does not provide the necessary definition; Deronda chooses to continue his education on the Continent, his wanderings there suggesting that he still has no location.

Gentile society – as far as Deronda has experienced it – cannot give him the shape and spirit he requires, so he turns to the other society within the confines of the novel: Jewish society. He is shown to be distanced from Judaism when he first encounters Kalonymos, and is made to realize 'he did not know the name of his mother's family' (DD, p.275), and birth into Judaism is traditionally matrilinear. Therefore, although Deronda may sympathize with Jews and be drawn to Mordecai and Mirah, he cannot partake of his tradition and heritage until he discovers his mother is Jewish.

The relationship between Mordecai and Deronda, with specific references to Judaic potential which the former sees in the latter, incorporates an important aspect of the *golem* gaining essence. Mordecai's search has been for a type of individual who will be able to continue his ideals and visions for Judaism. This individual is described in terms of the *golem*: '... his imagination had constructed another man who would be something more ample than the second soul bestowed, according to the Cabbalists, to help out the insufficient first' (DD, p.356). This suggests something more than just *ibbur* – one form of metempsychosis advocated by kabbalists where an almost perfect soul is placed alongside another in order to reach perfection. Construction of another man is a golemish image, and what is implied is that Mordecai requires a new and empty vessel to transmit his ideas.

In his book, *The Golem Legend: Origins and Implications*, Byron Sherwin quotes a source which explains the interpretation of *golem* attributes in humans:

Golem refers to a person who has intellectual and moral virtues. They, however, are not perfected, nor do they follow a proper sequence. Rather they contain disarray and confusion and are intermingled with deficiency. Therefore such a person is called 'Golem' so as to liken him to a utensil that would be made by a craftsman which would have its implemental form but which would lack completion and improvement ...⁵

Mordecai wants a type of person who will be an empty vessel, so that he can fulfil the potentiality and make him a vehicle for his soul's work, and the ideal qualities he looks for are: 'Youth, beauty, refinement, Jewish birth, noble gravity' (DD, p.356). All of these are personified in Deronda. It is when his ideal shape is aligned with his Jewish heritage that Deronda becomes a complete individual; and it is this same input into the novel that allows an analeptic shaping of the novel's direction. The vessel is filled with the essence of Judaism, symbolised by marriage to Mirah who represents, variously, the feminine principal necessary for completion in Jewish mysticism, and the soul of Judaism.

Preceding events are amorphous because Deronda has no shaping influence; his inconsequential activities have been mirrored in the disparate nature of the novel. Similarly, his new essence sharpens his presence in the narrative, and he is no longer an 'ineffectual angel',⁶ but a guiding influence from then on.

The *golem* as unformed mass is a striking metaphor for the Jewish diaspora; Jewish people coming together to form a nation becomes symbolized by the *golem* finding shape or gaining a soul. Jewish religious history is based on exile, itself implying a loss of essence – as the Kabbalah scholar, Gershom Scholem, maintains: 'Absolute homelessness was the sinister symbol of absolute Godlessness, of utter moral and spiritual degradation.'⁷ According to Jewish mysticism the arrival of the Messiah brings a return to Israel and the return to God. In this way the *golem's* shape is a metaphor for Messiah and nation.

A central theme of *Daniel Deronda* is the hope of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Set against this is the continued diffusion of Jews into other societies – a process which is criticized in the novel not because of anti-Semitism, but because of Zionism. Diffusion into other societies is, according to Mordecai, a betrayal of the nationhood that binds Jews together:

Can a fresh-made garment of citizenship weave itself into the flesh and change the slow deposit of eighteen centuries? What is the citizenship of him who walks among a people he has no kindred and fellowship with, and has lost the sense of brotherhood with his own race? It is a charter of selfish ambition and rivalry in low greed. He is an alien in spirit, whatever he may be in form; he sucks the blood of mankind, he is not a man. (*DD*, pp.396-97)

The *golem* is implicit in subsequent ways: a Jew separate from the race is incomplete; assimilation deprives Judaism of wholeness, therefore it is incomplete: it is *golem* therefore godless. Deronda's duty, as part of Judaism, is not to assimilate – to marry Gwendolen – but to join with the Jewish community.

Deronda is shown to be a homeless person. Like Mordecai, Kalonymos and his grandfather, he is something of a wanderer: he wanted 'to be at home in foreign countries, and follow in imagination the travelling students of the middle ages' (*DD*, p.133). Wandering Jews are obvious references to the mythical character – itself a Christian rendering of the 'homelessness is Godlessness' theme. For Deronda it is further emphasis of his shapelessness. Manifestation of his national zeal takes place after he has discovered his Judaism and become part of the community. National zeal is part of the essence and message transferred to him from Mordecai.

What becomes apparent, from Mordecai's polemic quoted above and Deronda's homelessness, is that both have little contextual application until viewed from the perspective of Deronda's Judaism; that is to say, they are part of an amorphous theme which only becomes focused in terms of Deronda when he discovers his heritage and himself gains shape. Thus on an individual level, he must do his duty, and choose Mirah above

Gwendolen. But in *Deronda*, individual and community combine. On a further level he is a metaphor and allegory for the state and potential of Judaism: while he is *golem* Judaism is *golem*; when he gains essence Judaism is ready to gain a homeland, and he sets out to establish this in Palestine. His personal consolidation heralds that of Israel.

The *golem* of Prague is apparently human in all respects but one; it lacks speech. Scholem gives the reason for this: 'the Golem could not speak, for the power of speech is God's alone to give'.⁸ There is a distinct link between speech and the soul. This was an opinion advocated by some of the Hasidim (Jewish mystics of Eastern and Central Europe): speech was the proof of a soul – thus of humanity – because it was the highest human faculty.

In *Daniel Deronda* lack of speech equates with lack of language, specifically Deronda's inability to speak Hebrew. In Judaism Hebrew is the language of God and is associated with creation. When Mordecai asks Deronda, 'Perhaps you know Hebrew?', Deronda replies: 'I am sorry to say, not at all' (DD, p.299). This is an admission of *golem*. Ignorance of the language of God, for a Jew, is to be without soul and humanity. Deronda's form-finding process is linked with learning Hebrew 'in deference to Mordecai' (DD, p.309). He is beginning to come to humanity – also the Jewish community – through knowledge of the language of God. It is significant that as the novel consolidates – when Deronda receives the injection of Jewish essence – Mordecai, in an active creative role, is teaching Deronda a piece of Rabbinic Hebrew.

George Eliot brings Mirah from Prague, the city associated most with the legend of the *golem* and significant in terms of interpretation of the legend. 'The Golem of Chelm' has a pre-Frankensteinian creature which becomes uncontrollable and ultimately destructive; the *golem* of the Prague legend does not have these characteristics (apart from a brief water-carrying episode which apparently influenced Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*). Instead as a protector - a redeemer and deliverer from pogroms after a 'blood libel'.⁹ In a more symbolic manner, the *golem* of Prague is associated with the Messiah: 'It is believed that he is ... waiting for the coming of the Messiah, or for the time when new dangers appear to menace the existence of Israel, to rise again and smite the foe.'¹⁰

Deronda is introduced into both the 'Jewish' and 'Gentile' parts of the novel as a deliverer: he saves Gwendolen from her debt to gambling – where it is a metaphor for temptation – and Mirah from suicide. This latter act of deliverance unites him with the *golem* of Prague. Mirah, as the soul and personification of Judaism, suffers persecution and betrayal, and is about to die; Deronda negates this menace to 'the existence of Israel'. Such a link with the fortunes of Judaism assigns Deronda a messianic role.

Mordecai identifies the arrival of the Messiah with Jewish nationhood: 'The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign' (DD, p.404). When Deronda sets out to establish a Jewish home in Palestine, it is a messianic act. Of added importance is the cohesive implication beyond Judaism which is an extension of the

deliverance of Gentiles (Gwendolen). Mordecai invokes the medieval Jewish mystic and poet, Yehuda Halevi – ‘But it is true, as Jehuda-ha-Levi first said, that Israel is the heart of mankind, if we mean by heart the core of affection which binds a race and its families in dutiful love’ (*DD*, p.399).¹¹ This is an idea which George Eliot developed further in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ (where Jewish nationhood was seen as the core and example by which Britain could rediscover its national heritage – an occurrence which is acted out initially in the allegorical relationship between Gwendolen and Deronda) and which extends the messianic principle: by establishing Israel, Deronda is establishing the organic centre of international consolidation.

Messianism is an important part of the structure of the novel, since what was disparate becomes cohesive through the *golem*. Deronda, in a mythological sense, is the union of the incomplete *golem* with the Messiah – a completion of a teleological link, and of a process whereby he draws together unattached parts (the Jews and ‘parts’ of the novel) into a single unit. As a *golem* within the novel, his acts of deliverance are separate. With the injection of Judaism into Deronda he ceases to be *golem* and both previous acts are symbols of his messianic characterization. At the same time that he ceases to be *golem* he gains meaning and location in both parts of the novel, uniting them into a visionary whole: his proposed founding of a Jewish homeland going beyond Judaism to imply international consolidation. He becomes the single character by and in whom the novel is united.

Notes.

- 1 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), Volume VII, p.756. See also Gershom Scholem’s *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim, (New York, 1969), pp. 158-204.
- 2 In the legend of Hanina and Oshaya, they make a calf one-third the normal size which they kill and eat. The legend is based on a ritual practice carried out to symbolize the forgetting of kabbalistic knowledge, and the re-learning of it.
- 3 William Baker (ed.), *Some George Eliot Notebooks: An Edition of the Carl Pforzheimer Holograph Notebooks*, (Salzburg, 1976), Volume I, Folio 23, p.114.
- 4 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, Cheap Edition (Edinburgh and London, 1884), p.134. All references will be to this edition and will be cited within the text by the abbreviation *DD* and the page number.
- 5 ‘Maimonides’ commentary to the *Mishnah*, quoted by Byron Sherwin in *The Golem Legend: Origins and Implications* (Lanham, New York, London, 1985), p.11.
- 6 Deronda is referred to as such by Nina Auerbach in *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1982), p.64.

- 7 Gershom Scholem quoted in William Baker's *George Eliot and Judaism*, p.65.
- 8 Scholem, p.36.
- 9 The Blood libel was the false accusation that Jews were murdering Christian children in order to use their blood to make Passover matzos.
- 10 See *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, edited by Nathan Ausubel, 14th printing (New York, 1954), p.612.
- 11 This citation of Halevi had also been used in *The Spanish Gypsy*, where it is voiced by Sephardo, the Jewish occultist. That it is said by him denotes George Eliot's awareness of the importance of national consolidation – which is used in conjunction with the Zingali as a major theme of the poem – to the Jewish situation at the same time. It was when Spain was fighting to expel the Moors that it also expelled the – Sephardic – Jews who had settled there, leaving them dispossessed.