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The conference opened with a characteristically rich and incisive paper by Barbara Hardy (Birkbeck), ‘Re-Reading Daniel Deronda’, which, sadly, was the last she was to deliver (see Obituary and Tributes elsewhere in this issue). She began by drawing on Cross’s Life to indicate the pulse of authorial experience discernible in the novel. The ‘terror’ referred to in the dedicatory poem – ‘Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul’ – and taken up in Gwendolen’s experience, is related by Cross in his ‘Introductory Sketch’ to George Eliot’s own night fears in childhood, while later in the novel Alcharisi defines a predicament he suggests was the author’s own when she declares to Daniel: ‘You may try, but you can never imagine what it is to have man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl’. The main focus of Barbara Hardy’s re-reading were the double retrospect, with its irony and climax, and the internal stories, what Gérard Genette calls ‘micro-narratives’, and Barbara Hardy sees as the life-narratives which are dramatized and implicitly analysed in narrative art. She concentrated on stories told by and about women: Mrs Glasher gives a terse and bitter account of her experience with Grandcourt to Gwendolen when they meet by the Whispering Stones, but we hear a different version, retailed as gossip by the connoisseur of social mores, Mr Vandernoodt, to Daniel, in which Mrs Glasher is supposed still to have Grandcourt under her thumb; Mordecai tells Mirah the story of a woman’s ‘noble’ self-sacrifice but she interprets it very differently; Alcharisi tells Daniel her passionate life-story, but his response is probably very different from the reader’s, particularly that of the feminist. The most dramatic and problematic of these stories is Gwendolen’s confession to Daniel about how Grandcourt drowned. As Barbara Hardy challengingly argued, this can be read as the story of a killing. The drowning Grandcourt, clearly unable to swim, twice calls out to Gwendolen as he surfaces to throw him the rope which she is holding in her hand, but, in a kind of paralysis that seems to be driven by her deepest desires, she does not move. Strangely, Daniel’s reaction to this confession is one of relief: he feels ‘the burden on his spirit less heavy than the foregoing dread’ since ‘the word guilty had held a possibility of interpretations worse than the fact’. Was he fearing a sin of commission, so that omission appears less damning? The episode seems curiously inconclusive, like the whole story of Gwendolen’s life; and in this respect it resembles the history of Berenice, where – like the novel itself – as Hans Meyrick puts it: ‘The story is chipped off, so to speak, and passes with a ragged edge into nothing’.

In ‘Daniel Deronda: The Two Halves That Were Never Whole’, Isobel Armstrong (Birkbeck) presented a paper that will become part of her forthcoming book on Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations and Nineteenth-Century Fiction. Noting that defenders of the Jewish half of the novel tend to advance philosophical reasons, she proposed instead that it represents an extreme response to the violence of the society in which Gwendolen lives. She began by presenting a new interpretation of the scene in which Mordecai and Daniel meet on Blackfriars Bridge. Sunset in Jewish iconography is associated with new beginnings and the meeting is a consummation and a birth from the amniotic waters of the Thames. What Mordecai can see from the bridge is Turneresque light while what Daniel is rowing towards is a project of
modern capital – since in 1864 the bridge is being rebuilt along with the new Embankment – and behind it the City and all its emblems of religion, law and empire. Daniel is rowing indeed towards everything that is excluded from, or excludes, what Mordecai is seeing; and it is the violence of this exclusion that provokes the fanaticism of the Jewish response. The novel bifurcates into the world of Gwendolen and the world of Mordecai, and there can be no possibility of fusion between them since Gwendolen's society cannot be touched by Jewish idealism. It is a society without empathy, structured in vertical class hierarchies and marked by a politics of contempt, as opposed to Mordecai's politics of passion. Jews, servants and the working class are excluded and dehumanized as mere bodies, and even Hans uses Mirah as the abjected body in his painting. The violence, and the violent prejudice, of this society are embodied in the aristocratic Grandcourt for whose class blood means lineage, whereas for Mordecai it means republican consanguinity. The latter's politics are not clearly defined – what he wants from a nation-state remains indeterminate – but Isobel Armstrong was able to suggest both the strengths and the weaknesses of his political position by illuminating reference to music which provides the characteristic imagery of the Jewish half of the novel, where George Eliot not only describes music but makes her prose into a form of music. The question put to Mordecai by Gideon in 'The Hand and Banner' about the selective nature of his view of Jewish memory and inheritance is, for instance, never answered but swept aside in a flood of visionary rhetoric that is akin to music in its emotional effect. Because of the way it is apprehended, music is a form of freedom, and Mordecai's visionary rhetoric enacts the freedom he envisages for the Jewish nation even if he cannot define it in political terms. At the same time music cannot transform the Gwendolen half of the narrative – as in the tableau vivant, she remains frozen and paralysed, and music cannot awaken her from the imprisoning power of her society.

The ‘Two Sequels to Daniel Deronda’ discussed by John Rignall (Warwick) were a seven-page satirical squib in Mr Punch's Pocket-Book for 1877 entitled ‘Daniel Deronda Book IX’, and a short novel, Gwendolen: or, Reclaimed: A Sequel to ‘Daniel Deronda’, published in Boston Massachusetts in 1878. The latter was anonymous, but as John Picker has pointed out in a fine article on the two sequels in New Literary History (2006), a variant title page in one edition identifies the author as Anna Clay Beecher. Who exactly she was remains a mystery, and Rignall admitted that he could find no evidence to support his speculation that she might have been a descendant of the Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay who had married into the abolitionist Beecher family of New England. Both sequels end by uniting Gwendolen and Daniel after Mirah's premature death, but where the Punch piece is crudely comic – little more than a tissue of anti-Semitic slurs and jokes about pork and usury – the novel, while expressing a similar degree of prejudice, aspires to the condition of cheap romance, introducing a form of romantic Byronic hero who once was in love with Mrs Davilow and who proves instrumental in bringing Gwendolen and Daniel together again. The paper concentrated on the novel, showing how it displays many features of the novels by women famously eviscerated by George Eliot in her 1856 article 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'. Prone to vacuous generalization and wordy banality, slapdash in construction and defective in logic and consistency, Gwendolen takes George Eliot's work and characters back to, as it were, the infantile stage of the novel's development in the nineteenth century, while she herself was heading in the opposite direction, going on to stress the affinities between the English and Jewish peoples in Impressions of Theophrastus Such. A truer sequel to Daniel Deronda is to be found in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’.
Marianne Burton (Royal Holloway), in her discussion of ‘Existentialism and the Female Slave in Daniel Deronda’, began with Kierkegaard, who did not believe in equal rights and considered that men and women were only entirely equal at the altar when faced with the question ‘Do you take this man/woman etc’. Thus for him ‘woman’s freedom lies in the choosing of the husband who is to be her master’. Kierkegaard’s thinking outlines the basic tenets of what was to become known as existentialism: individuals are free and therefore responsible for their own fate; they experience alienation from the world, and have a sense of the absurdity, or meaninglessness, of existence. In George Eliot’s novel these three traits can be seen in Daniel, who seeks a truth that is true for him. The predicament of women is more difficult and the question of their freedom more vexed, but two of them exercise it in radical fashion. Catherine Arrowpoint determines her own fate by marrying Klesmer as does Alcharisi by becoming an opera singer and giving up her son. She is the true existentialist in the novel, the female slave who casts off her chains and wins. Of course she is not meant to be admired, but existentialism never claims that being radically free makes you admired or happy. Gwendolen, trapped in a bad marriage, cannot be free and is more like Camus’s Sisyphus, and if her experience seems to raise the great existentialist question of ‘why not suicide?’, it also prefigures existentialist thinking by finding the answer in notions of duty and human solidarity. Jean Sudrann once pointed out how isolated and alienated all the characters are in Daniel Deronda, and Marianne Burton argued that it is indeed an existentialist text. George Eliot saw the absurdity of existence and exercised her freedom, but the more she cast off family ties, the more she felt the loss of them, and like existentialists came back to the idea of duty and of action in the interests of human solidarity.

In ‘Seated lonely on the Ruins of Jerusalem: Religion, Nation and the Jewess in Daniel Deronda’, Nadia Valman (Queen Mary, University of London) began by considering how Jews figured in nineteenth-century thought. For Protestant Christians they were unassimilable yet indispensable, both uniquely privileged and at the same time a law-bound, corrupt race. This bifurcation into the archaically anti-modern and the idealized tended to crystallize into two figures: the elderly male Jew and the young Jewess. In the prolific literature of conversion in evangelical writing between the 1820s and the 1840s, the Jewess was a particular object of concern and one of the most popular charitable causes among middle-class Christian women. According to the evangelical ideology of gender, women had a particular capacity for empathy with Christian sacrifice, and in conversion narratives it is typically a banker’s daughter who converts to Christianity after her mother dies. Conversion texts competed with advocacy of Jewish emancipation and had a deep and long-lasting influence on the literary representation of Jews in Jewish and non-Jewish writing. George Eliot’s evangelical upbringing is relevant here for conversion narratives leave traces in Daniel Deronda. For Alcharisi, Judaism is masculinized as a narrow system of constraints represented by her father, and she breaks away into the cosmopolitan world of the stage. In George Eliot’s secularized version of a conversion narrative, she finds freedom not in Christianity but in culture, and her story implies the incompatibility of Judaism and modernism. However, the argument that the narrow legalism of Judaism can be transcended by the universal religion of art is not endorsed by the novel, which presents an alternative in the story of Mirah. Art for her is not a means to freedom but is forced upon her by her father for his cosmopolitan commercial purposes. Her story offers an alternative account of Judaism in which it is associated not with law but with the affective power of music: it is a mystified and pre-rational Judaism associated with her mother rather
than her pandering father. Her story also bears traces of conversion narratives since her journey is a form of Calvary that casts her as a Christ-figure, alone and forsaken, while her suffering and martyrdom seem to make her ripe for conversion. But what she is converted to is not Christianity but the kind of nationalism she sings of in a setting of Leopardi’s Ode to Italy, for its image of Italy provides a model for the new nationhood of the Jews. In the 1870s George Eliot was turning away from the religion of humanity towards nationalism, and in Daniel Deronda she points to the alternative destinies of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, universalism and particularism. Thus Alcharisi embodies the discontent of diasporic Jews and Mirah the ideal of national renewal.

In ‘Gwendolen Harleth, “Mind and Millinery”: George Eliot and the Silver Fork School of Fiction’, Royce Mahawatte (Central St Martin’s) argued that, although George Eliot mocked an evangelical variant of the silver-fork novel in ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, some of its tropes and characters and material culture find their way into the Gwendolen half of Daniel Deronda. Silver Fork novels – a term coined dismissively by Hazlitt – emerge in the 1830s and last until Ouida in the 1890s, and Daniel Deronda’s affinities with the sub-genre have the effect of questioning the realist dimension of the Gwendolen narrative. The opening of the novel contains many of the staples of Silver Fork fiction, such as the emphasis on clothes and jewels, and Gwendolen herself is described in a way that borders on parody of the Silver Fork form. Before her marriage she sees herself as a Silver Fork heroine and strives to be one, but with the advent of Mrs Glasher – like Grandcourt and Lush, a stock figure of the sensation novel – the silver-fork analogy begins to break down. In the Silver Fork novel, which is a form of fashion-writing – objects like the diamond necklace are made desirable, but Mrs Glasher tinges them with horror. The diamonds do not confer status but act as a means of levelling retribution. The ending of the novel, however, still displays affinities with Silver Fork fiction. In Mothers and Daughters by Catherine Gore, the queen of the sub-genre, a young woman remains unwed at the conclusion, suggesting that Gwendolen’s fate is not unique.

Louise Lee (Roehampton) in ‘Mrs Arrowpoint’s Suspicions: Comedies of Knowledge in Daniel Deronda’ sought to define the emotional temperament of the 1870s as the context for an understanding of the comic elements in Daniel Deronda. Where the impact of evangelicalism earlier in the nineteenth century has been examined by Ian Bradley in terms of The Call to Seriousness, she argued that a countervailing ‘Call to Levity’ comes about in the 1870s in a shift of cultural temper that is related to evolutionary theory and anticipates the fin-de-siècle. Proposing that scientifically educated novelists like George Eliot move towards a new kind of levity in that decade, she examined some comic moments in Daniel Deronda, in particular the scene between Gwendolen and Mrs Arrowpoint at Quetcham Hall. Gwendolen tries to win over Mrs Arrowpoint by devoting fulsome attention to her but, failing to realize that the latter’s rather ridiculous appearance conceals a sharp mind, she overplays her own naivety and her flattery and raises Mrs Arrowpoint’s suspicion that she is the target of satire. There is a subtle comedy of misunderstanding here, and Gwendolen’s disingenuous admission that she has difficulty in deciding which parts of a book are serious and which funny, often laughing in the wrong place, is truer than she realizes. When her cousin Rex has a riding accident, she responds inappropriately with ‘a descending scale of laughter’, and when Grandcourt is seen as a prospective suitor by her family, she flippantly declares that she will laugh at him if he proposes. Her punishment for the sin of laughter is to have her features turned to stone. Louise Lee then put Gwendolen’s experience into a wider cultural context by
showing that she was not alone in being confused as to what is funny and what is not. Dickens, for example, was convulsed with a desire to laugh at Hone’s funeral, and Herbert Spencer in his ‘Philosophy of Laughter’ (1860) described the mechanics of this kind of incident by theorizing that a build-up of energy has to be relieved in laughter. Another blurring of the dividing line between laughing and crying, comic and serious, can be found in Lewis Carroll’s nonsense fiction which anticipates Darwin’s work on the emotions.

After the lunch interval John Burton reported on the work of the George Eliot Fellowship in the past year, outlining the state of play with the proposed new visitor centre at Griff and its projected costs, and inviting new members. After the tea interval, some of the speakers entertained the company with readings of two scenes from Daniel Deronda, and a most successful day was rounded off by a wine reception generously funded by the Fellowship.

[Versions of the papers by Marianne Burton and John Rignall are published in this issue].