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‘WOMAN’S FREEDOM LIES IN CHOOSING THE HUSBAND WHO IS TO BE HER MASTER’: EXISTENTIALISM AND THE FEMALE SLAVE IN DANIEL DERONDA

By Marianne Burton

Various commentators have suggested that Daniel Deronda can be read as a text which espouses early existentialist principles, elevating the individual’s search for personal truths above society’s expectations and conceptions of duty. I am going to suggest that Deronda’s proto-existentialism is of particular interest when viewed as poised between nineteenth- and twentieth-century formulations of existentialism, the godly and the godless, and when Deronda’s search is compared with the narratives of the female characters whose freedoms are more curtailed by social mores.

Existentialism is generally considered to start with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish Christian philosopher, the term ‘existentialism’ coming from the Danish word for existence. Kierkegaard believed in the primacy of the individual’s conscience in his relationship with God, and fought a heated battle against the state-controlled Danish church which he considered more materially driven than religiously focused. It was Kierkegaard who wrote in his journal the phrase often regarded as the essence of existentialism, ‘the crucial thing is to find a truth that is true for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die’. Following Nietzsche claiming God is dead and Dostoyevsky suggesting if God is dead then all things are permitted, existentialism developed into its modern form with the writings of Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). Modern existentialism is a godless philosophy, advocating the abandonment of metaphysical hope in order to assign meaning to our freedoms in the present. Yet Camus and Sartre ask what are very Victorian post-Darwinian questions, very Dover Beach questions: what is the purpose of life in a world without God? How should we live our lives with moral and religious imperatives breaking down around us?

It could then be said that there are two types of existentialism, the godly and the godless, the Kierkegaardian and the twentieth-century. The post-Darwinian but not yet post-Nietzschean Deronda is a narrative with one foot in each camp. Eliot was writing for an audience who, whatever they actually believed, had to be regarded by author and publisher to be god-fearing, and if Eliot herself did not believe in God, she did believe in man. As Diana Postlethwaite has commented, ‘while readers of Lyell and Darwin (George Eliot among them) may have lost their faith in the God of Genesis, they did not necessarily lose their faith in the universe’. If Middlemarch is, as Sally Shuttleworth claimed, ‘tempered by a post-Darwinian pessimism’, then Deronda has taken a further step away from deference to the English churches in their interesting variety without wholly jettisoning godliness in all its forms. Sir Hugo Mallinger’s church refurbished for horses, symbols of materialism throughout the novel, is a metaphor Kierkegaardian in resonance, yet Mirah’s adherence to her faith is presented as praiseworthy throughout.

Existentialism has never been a movement as such. It has no absolute identity and its
proponents changed their views over time. Even those writers categorized as such did not necessarily consider themselves existentialists; it was a label imposed on them, rather than one they espoused. Kierkegaard lived before the term was coined, and Camus rejected the link often made between him and Sartre, bluntly rebutting the label in 1945, ‘Je ne suis pas existentialiste’. However, there are three tenets generally regarded as being fundamental to existentialism. Firstly, and most crucially, that every individual is radically free to determine his or her own life’s course, to find a truth that is true for them. You are solely responsible for yourself and your own soul. You cannot defend your choices by reference to the belief systems of parents, friends, priests, or commanding officers. Every man over the age of thirty should be his own pastor, Kierkegaard suggested. The second tenet is that one feels alienated from a world that is apparently meaningless and often brutal. One feels a stranger in one’s own land:

I stick my finger into the world – it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? (Kierkegaard)

Thirdly, and closely linked to this alienation, is a realization that much of existence and human struggle is absurd. If we are all going to die and there is no afterlife, what is the point of living? When we see one man passionately playing golf, another clambering to get a political post, it all seems equally pointless. One perceives a lack of integrity and meaning in oneself and society. According to Camus, one’s freedom – and the opportunity to give life meaning – lies in this realization. It is by acknowledging the absurdities in our lives, that the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes, that we as individuals become truly free ‘to live without appeal’ as he describes it.

Deronda at the start of the novel is suffering what Yaron Peleg describes as a ‘vague existential discontent as a member of the British aristocracy’. He does not know how to attach himself to or participate in the society he observes. He feels alienated by lack of knowledge about his familial past, and questions ‘whether it is worth while to take part in the battle of the world’ (Ch. 17). He does not wish to sing, to write, to take up law or politics, to ‘make a living out of borrowed opinions’ (Ch. 33), and still less to stand outside the activities of men as a critic, ‘stiffened into the ridiculous attitude of self-assigned superiority’ (Ch. 37). The freedoms his society offers are not ones that attract him, he wants a truth that will ‘make his life a sequence which would take the form of duty’ (Ch. 37) as long as it is a duty that he chooses, not one imposed upon him.

When Deronda starts his search for truth that is true for him, he is aided by already being free by the standards of the day. He is rich, young and healthy with an indulgent adoptive father, far more ‘spoilt’ in material ways than Gwendolen, the ‘Spoiled Child’ of Book I’s title. World-questioning is easy, as Eliot points out, when it is ‘sustained by three or five per cent, on capital which somebody else has battled for’ (Ch. 17). Even Mordecai seems to equate freedom with wealth, ‘I desired that your life should be free,’ he says ‘dreamily’ after asking Deronda whether he is rich (Ch. 40). When Deronda finds his truth he moves between faiths with an enviable ease. On learning Sir Hugo Mallinger is not his father, Deronda is described as feeling ‘like one whose creed is gone before he has religiously embraced another’ (Ch. 49), but this metaphor of disorientation does not seem to describe Deronda when he actually moves between creeds. To be brought up as an English gentleman Deronda would have been baptised and educated in the Church of England and attended Church of England services. He is the only man who removes his hat in the stable-church. Yet there is a lack of struggle in changing faiths
which renders the issue more expedient than spiritual, more existential then godly. He tells his mother that his English education means he cannot be like his grandfather: ‘The Christian sympathies in which my mind was reared can never die out of me’. Yet Eliot sidesteps what this means in faith terms, just as she does by what Mordecai and Deronda represent in being the ‘modern Jew’. ‘I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed’, Deronda says (Ch. 60), and Joseph Kalonymos, who has pursued Alcharisi as an avenging Fury, receives this with as much placidity as Mallinger takes Deronda’s dropping of Anglicanism. Deronda is a gilded youth; no one protests opposition to his plans.

This ease does make Deronda something of a ‘waxwork hero’, and his search for truth less interesting from an existentialist viewpoint than the search of the women, hedged around with nineteenth-century limitations, effectively owned first by their birth families, then given away to a husband like ‘a meal to a minotaur’ in Klesmer’s words (Ch. 22). The language of slavery was often used to describe women’s subordinate condition within marriage. The law regarded women in a similar light to children:

the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband. Women’s status improved as the century advanced through legislation such as The Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults Upon Women and Children Act 1853 and The Married Women’s Property Acts 1870 and 1882. But progress was slow. The age of consent for girls outside marriage was only raised from twelve to thirteen in 1875 and it remained at twelve within marriage until 1929. Many nineteenth-century women only had one moment of significant choice, in how and whether they swapped their family’s tutelage for a husband’s. Nor was this necessarily a moment of any great freedom; it was circumscribed by expectations of family and society, and by the quality of the men who presented themselves.

Kierkegaard, like George Eliot, did not believe that women should have equal rights with men, such as the vote. He believed that on marriage, ‘The man is to be the woman’s master and she subservient to him’ but also that when a woman is asked in church whether she will accept ‘this man – as master, for otherwise she does not get him’, by this acceptance she becomes before God equal with the man, ‘inwardly everything is changed.’ Of course, the logical antithesis to Kierkegaard’s assertion that a woman rises to become equal to her husband, assuming him to be a good man, is that in choosing a bad one, she is dragged down to his level. On a material, rather than a religious level, this was also how society saw it, with the woman raised, or lowered, to the social position of her husband; so Sir Hugo complains when Grandcourt’s will does not allow Gwendolen to ‘live on in a style fitted to the rank he had raised her to’ (Ch. 59).

Catherine Arrowpoint is the maiden choosing who most resembles Deronda, being rich and parentally indulged. Catherine is acutely aware of the importance of her moment of freedom and how, as an heiress, she was likely to be encouraged to ‘consider herself an appendage to her fortune, and marry where others think her fortunes ought to go’ (Ch. 22). She sees the absurdity of the matches her parents suggest, such as the tiresomely pink Mr. Bult, and, although she could refuse to marry at all, family pressure, as with Alcharisi and Gwendolen, insists it is her ‘duty’ to be a wife. Catherine however is sufficiently astute to remain unmarried at twenty-four, an age mature enough to assess the men around her. She takes charge of her family’s social invitations allowing her to manipulate whom she meets. This is crucial because,
whether in Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen or Jane Austen’s Longbourn, it was difficult for a young woman to meet many eligible men. Even Gwendolen, ‘a young lady, perfect in person, accomplishments, and costume, has not the trouble of rejecting many offers’ (Ch. 9). Klesmer, ‘versatile and fascinating as a young Ulysses’ (Ch. 22), is no Casaubon but a genuine artist. He is not even a Ladislaw, since he can afford to keep a wife. Catherine’s flouting of her society’s rules works because of her ‘clear head and strong will’ and her family’s eventual capitulation.

Eliot neatly sidesteps the question of whether it is an interfaith marriage, leaving it unclear how Jewish Klesmer is, this ‘felicitous combination of the German, the Sclave and the Semite’ (Ch. 5). He does compare himself with the Wandering Jew figure, but that was a common referent for alienation; Kierkegaard did the same. If Klesmer is Jewish, he is, like Alcharisi, shutting the door on that for his children; since Arrowpoint is not Jewish her children will not be. If Catherine is correct in her semi-serious claim that the cosmopolitan Klesmer looks forward to a fusion of races, then the pragmatic nature of the individuals is likely to ensure that the metaphysical is not permitted to complicate their present. Just as Deronda moves between religions without spiritual qualms, so the Klesmer-Arrowpoint melding is arranged according to the wishes of the individuals; it is a triumph of existentialist principles reassigning religion to a subordinate role.

Klesmer and Alcharisi are the novel’s true artists, and Alcharisi, like Catherine, is a female slave who, from an existentialist viewpoint, appears to win. Out of Mirah, Gwendolen and Alcharisi, it would be difficult to say who feels their bondage most acutely, but Alcharisi is the one who describes it most eloquently. She uses slave imagery to describe her relationships with father, race, and gender:

‘I was forced into marrying your father — forced, I mean, by my father’s wishes and commands; and besides, it was my best way of getting some freedom. I could rule my husband, but not my father. I had a right to be free. I had a right to seek my freedom from a bondage that I hated. [...] And the bondage I hated for myself I wanted to keep you from. [...] I relieved you from the bondage of having been born a Jew. [...] you can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. [...] men turn their wives and daughters into slaves. They would rule the world if they could; but not ruling the world, they throw all the weight of their will on the necks and souls of women.’ (Ch. 51).

Alcharisi is the novel’s most authentic existentialist, ‘She had cast all precedent out of her mind. Precedent had no excuse for her’ (Ch. 51). Alienated from her birth ties she rebels against the absurdity she sees in the Jewish religion and makes herself and her son free of it. She gains the career she craves, takes control in her first marriage, and, although she regrets her second marriage because its timing interrupts her career, she is nevertheless rewarded with an aristocratic title and five children to minister to her in age. This looks like winning.

However, since failing to do duty by your family is the biggest crime a woman can commit in an Eliot novel, the reader is positioned to observe Alcharisi through Deronda’s judgmental eyes and to be ‘repelled by [her] frank coldness’. There is a question whether Alcharisi’s ability to love is warped because she did not rebel early enough to save her inner self. Her first marriage is forced on her. She is effectively raped with her father’s consent and Daniel is the child of that rape. Now she is dying, her spiritual dread is not due to innate religious or superstitious fears — ‘No faith is strong within me’ — but to patriarchy hunting her.
down and bullying her:

Joseph Kalonymos [...] found me weak and shattered. [...] He said I was going down to
the grave clad in falsehood and robbery. (Ch. 51)

Kalonymos’s actions are as intrusive of Alcharisi’s personal freedoms as were her father’s in
coeering her into marriage with her cousin. But the existentialists have always agreed that in
throwing off society’s rules, you cannot expect other people not to condemn you. Being
radically free does not always make you admired, nor does it necessarily make you happy.

Neil Hertz asks why the only genuine female artist in Eliot’s novels, and the one often
mooted as a biographical portrait of the author herself, must be treated as a scapegoat for
women’s ambition. Why can’t she be happy? Bonnie Lisle suggests Eliot’s ‘troublesome
insistence on marriage as the only happy ending available to her heroines’ is due to Eliot not
valuing the artist’s life, because that is what she herself has achieved. Eliot harbours no
romanticism about art, whereas she remains romantic about married love and motherhood
because that eludes her. Eliot certainly found many aspects of authorship difficult. She found
writing hard work and was made wretched by critics’ disparagement and by friends’ jealousy.
Chapter 51’s epigraph linking Alcharisi with Erinna, the Greek poetess chained to a spindle by
her mother to spin until she dies, would indicate that Eliot does not see Alcharisi as free to
choose her art, but as slave to it. 14

At the novel’s start, Gwendolen wants to be an Alcharisi. She feels herself ‘a princess
in exile’ and longs to be adored, to have the tribute of men without their physicality, to have
them subject to her as Alcharisi did at her fame’s height. She wants to be an Alcharisi even
more as her narrative progresses, when only marriage can provide an escape from genteel
poverty and the perceived humiliation of work. Since however Gwendolen can sing neither like
a peal of bells nor like the gentler-voiced Mirah, she marries, setting aside the conscience-
question, as Kierkegaard puts it, of whether this man is fit to be her master, and follows ‘the
lure through a long Satanic masquerade’ (Ch. 64).

So what happens if you are a woman who gets her moment of freedom wrong? If your
husband-master is lacking in some way? What if you are a Romola married to Tito, or a
Dorothea married to Casaubon, or Gwendolen? How can you be said to be radically free if you
are chained to a dead weight, morally, emotionally or intellectually; if life has no
transcendence, no affection, no meaning, no escape? The existentialists always recognized that
there are certain givens in life that cannot be changed. We cannot change our place or date of
birth, our own bodily health, necessarily, or our own parents. Our past may not determine us
but it is unchangeable.

Camus wrote an essay, ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’, which explores the dilemma of radical
freedom in the present curtailed by the past. He considers Sisyphus in Greek mythology
condemned to an eternity of pushing a rock up a hill each day, to watch it roll back each night.
Camus claims that even for Sisyphus, some freedom is possible. He concentrates on Sisyphus
walking down at the day’s end without the boulder:

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. [...] I see that man going
back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never
know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering,
that is the hour of consciousness.

49
Sisyphus is conscious of his wretched condition. If he were not, there would be no tragedy. But the fact that respite returns as surely as his suffering means that, although physically he is chained, mentally he remains free in some small way. One cannot escape unhappiness, Camus says, but there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn:

one always finds one’s burden again. But [...] the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.¹⁵

And the married Gwendolen, beautiful and healthy with her two-and-twenty years, world-weary and worn with spiritual dread, is Sisyphus. Her ‘world-nausea’ and lack of control over her destiny is only exacerbated, not cured, through marriage. ‘I must go on. I can’t alter it,’ she says, since Grandcourt has the ‘ghostly army’ of Victorian society at his back to enforce her bondage:

‘I must get up in the morning and do what every one else does. It is all like a dance set beforehand. I seem to see all that can be—and I am tired and sick of it. And the world is all confusion to me.’ (Ch. 36)

Her hidden knife is not only a potential instrument of murder, it is an instrument of suicide, ‘death by cop’ as we would call it. If Gwendolen kills Grandcourt, she knows she will be hanged: ‘I thought of what would be if I—I felt what would come—how I should dread the morning—wishing it would be always night.’ (Ch. 57)

Deronda tries to re-establish her sense of self. He points out correctly that any of the roads Gwendolen could have taken would have been distasteful to her to some degree:, ’I don’t think you could have escaped the painful process [of learning about life] in some form or other’ because, like Sisyphus, one does always find one’s burden again. He reminds her that her mind remains free:

‘[...] there are many thoughts and habits that may help us to bear inevitable sorrow’

‘What sort of earth or heaven would hold any spiritual wealth in it for souls pauperized by inaction?’

‘The refuge you are needing from personal trouble is the higher, the religious life, which holds an enthusiasm for something more than our own appetites and vanities [...]’

‘Fixed meditation may do a great deal toward defining our longing or dread. We are not always in a state of strong emotion, and when we are calm we can use our memories and gradually change the bias of our fear, as we do our tastes.’ (Ch. 36)

It is noticeable that Deronda’s appeals to religion are subordinated to those exhorting personal knowledge and interest in the community. No Christian in the novel speaks of their religion with the love Mirah talks about hers. Spoken references to ‘God’ from Christians tend to be limited to exclamations and idiomatic use; it is Mirah, Mordecai and, unexpectedly, Alcharisi who use the term to stand for a living force in their lives. Eliot may not retain awe for Christianity, but she retains respect for the Jewish love of their God.

In her life, Eliot could be claimed to be an existentialist by the accepted definitions. Her religious scepticism, her life in London with Chapman, her relationship with Lewes, her writing, these could all be said to be indicative of an existentialist mindset. Even her dress was
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The first article of her creed is – I believe in Humanity as the embracer of every moral end that is possible for man; as the only and sufficient object of his highest hopes, and his truest religious emotions.20

As Deronda counsels Gwendolen, the answer to life being tragic and absurd is not that one commits suicide, or throws off all standards. Camus wrote:

The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning [...]. It is not this discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and the rules for action that can be drawn from it.21

Camus and Sartre were both active in supporting the Resistance during the Second World War German occupation of France. Avi Sagi points out how the war changed Camus and that human solidarity and identification with the other’s suffering became for him the basis of a new ethics of human responsibility.22 This was how Eliot saw the world, as in her famous comments to Benjamin Jowett about wanting an ethical system founded upon altruism.23 Life is repetitive, and the universe is likely to be uncaring, and we all have to die. But, except in the most extreme cases, life remains worth living. Even the hapless Gwendolen is freed from servitude to try again. As Camus famously said, however awful and absurd life might be, I have ‘my revolt, my freedom, my passion’,24 my revolt against life being meaningless, my freedom which allows me to choose what I do about it, and my passion which transfigures the meaningless into something of meaning. ‘By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death – and I refuse suicide.’25 Barbara Bodichon visited Eliot on 5th June 1879, six months after Lewes’ death. She wrote that Eliot looked wretchedly thin, ‘like the black shadow of herself’, but she was determined to keep well because she had so much to do and because ‘the world was so intensely interesting.’ [...] We both agreed in the great love we had for life.26

Notes

This paper was first presented at the George Eliot Conference at Senate House in London on 7 November 2015.


52
Albert Camus, ‘Non, je ne suis pas existentialiste’, Les Nouvelles Littéraires, November 15, 1945.


As with the heroine of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s 1948 film The Red Shoes.


From a critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea, cited in Avi Sagi, Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd, Batya Stein (trans.) (New York, Rodopi, 2002), p. 44.

Avi Sagi, Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd, Batya Stein (trans.) (New York, Rodopi, 2002), p. 44.
York, Rodopi, 2002), Chap. 11 and elsewhere.


25 Ibid.