Daniel Deronda: The Cultural Imperative of Religion

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George Eliot’s last novel *Daniel Deronda* differs strikingly from her earlier works in the presentation of its protagonists and her innovative use of the literary genres of realism and romanticism. In her earlier novels Eliot had espoused an idea of humanism that transcended social class by fictionalizing the small but significant contributions ordinary men and women make towards England’s social and cultural progress. Eliot had created realistic heroes with human frailties on the principle that ‘human deeds are made up of the most subtly intermixed good and evil’.1 Furthermore, she had attacked the ideal hero type, who was the favourite subject of certain ‘lady novelists’, as unrealistic, dishonest and mischievous.2 Stowe’s *Dred*, for example, was criticized for idealizing slaves and implying that they were inherently better than their masters.3 Yet, in *Deronda*, Eliot could be accused of similar bias when she depicts Deronda, Mirah and Mordecai as seemingly flawless Jews, while the secular figures of Gwendolen and Grandcourt are morally corrupt. Eliot’s main complaint against the kind of fiction which falls loosely into the category of romance was its author’s inability to ‘describe actual life and her fellow-men’.4 In its stead, Eliot advocated ‘genuine observation, humour, passion’,5 which became her trademark and definition of realism.

I will argue that Eliot explored in *Deronda* the dichotomies that she perceived in the kind of pluralism, tolerance and cultural progress she had advocated in her earlier works. The cultural discourse which Eliot seeks to address was defined by religious, scientific and philosophical views; they disrupted each others’ assumptions, but also contributed toward an expanding view of the world and how it functions. Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptual theory of discourse can illustrate how *Deronda* explored a complex process between incompatible ideas like secularism and religion and the function of tensions between them. Bakhtin identifies contrasting ideological tensions as a ‘contradiction-riddle, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies’.6 According to Bakhtin, both orthodox sentiments that act as centripetal elements and their opposite, centrifugal forces, which disrupt that activity, are necessary for progress: ‘alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification go forward.’7 In *Deronda* these contrasting sentiments are enacted between religion and secularism, Judaism and common cultural forces; some sought to make things cohere, while others preferred new ideas.

It is clear that Eliot does not find conclusive answers to society’s ills in either religion or secularity, but sees them as relevant sentiments in a pluralistic society. Eliot’s procedure can be illustrated by reference to Dorothy Emmet who defines the Regulative Ideal as unrealizable: ‘it may be approached, but cannot be attained’.8 Emmet sees this as a source of open-ended investigative practice that seeks to define values such as truth and goodness as a goal rather than already realized. Its opposite, the Constitutive Ideal, is an *a priori* principle, which Emmet relates to religious doctrine and theoretical abstractions.9 These then are the contradictory elements Eliot deals with in *Deronda*, through the prism of Judaism. The contrasting ideological tensions between Jewish religion, which relates to the Constitutive Ideal, and secular sentiments, which, founded on the Regulative Ideal, are portrayed in the antithetical genres of realism and romanticism; which is to say, some Jewish characters are ideal hero types...
whereas others are portrayed more realistically. Both are cultural imperatives.

The religious portrayal suggests to Ruby Redinger that Eliot had reversed her humanistic values. Similarly, nineteenth-century commentators equated Deronda with a revocation of her realism in favour of religious mysticism, rather than the cultural dialectic that it is. Writing approvingly, Francillon noted that it was Eliot’s first romance and ‘so far outside Eliot’s other works in every respect as to make direct comparison impossible’ and Hutton considered the ‘distinctly religious tone,’ together with Daniel as ‘an ideal of goodness,’ which was antithetical to Eliot’s earlier realism. For one major theorist of realism, Hegel, romance with the ideal hero figure at its centre had its purpose during an earlier age of Christian missionary zeal: ‘the romantic world had only one ultimate purpose; to diffuse Christianity’. Seen from Hegel’s perspective, Eliot’s depictions of Judaism are rooted in notions of absolute truth and religious certainty, which had ceased to exist in England’s secular society.

For instance, Mordecai is consumed with religious fervour to ‘redeem the soil from debauched and paupered conquerors’ and to build ‘the spirit of our religious life’ (p. 538). Mordecai’s religious passion is all about safeguarding his faith from the corrupting forces of pluralism. But with Mordecai’s persona important questions about the idea of humanism and religion are raised in an age when intellectual, scientific and social developments rejected religious sentiments at an increasing rate. Hegel saw this dilemma as a sign of the modern age:

This polarization [between the rational and unscientific mind] seems to be the critical knot with which scientific culture is at present struggling and which it does not yet sufficiently understand. One side insists on the wealth of its material and intelligibility, the other side despises the latter and looks to common sense and godliness instead.

The problem concerns the convictions of secular and religious believers who reject each others’ contrasting insights and yet they influence a society that needs the distinctive contributions of contrasting ideas to reflect an increasingly polyglot world. For the sake of intellectual honesty each had to find a way to live in a society of varied viewpoints without losing their identity. Eliot relates this conundrum to the situation of European Jewry, whose predicament applies to other faiths and ideologies in the sense that they retained religious authenticity despite persecution.

Deronda addresses cultural dilemmas by juxtaposing the realistic and romantic genres, which questions the ideological certainty that is contained in the religious strand as well as the pluralism of the cultural discourse. The mixing of realism and romance corrupts the ‘purity’ of both forms, but the resulting plasticity enables Eliot to write more effectively about the complex cultural dialectic of her age. Eliot moulds her novel in such a way as to enable a discussion of problems that refuse to settle opposing claims, and these opposing sentiments are rooted in differing literary styles in Deronda. Realism illustrates contemporary problems, like the financial ruin of Gwendolen’s mother, which is based on England’s unregulated investment market that brought economic hardship to investors. Gwendolen is first seen sitting at the gambling table; a ‘problematic sylph’ (p. 10). She embodies a false critical consciousness and want of spiritual identity: ‘I like to differ from everybody; I think it is stupid to agree’ (p. 46). When Gwendolen marries it is for all the wrong reasons, her ensuing suffering is predictable:
'she was a banished soul – beholding a possible life which she had sinned herself away from’ (p.701). At her side is Daniel encouraging her: ‘you may become worthier than you have ever yet been’ (p. 700). Gwendolen’s journey from a selfish, vacuous beginning, through suffering towards greater humanity echoes Eliot’s earlier depictions of human progress and potential, which is an important modifying concept in Deronda.

Much in Deronda suggests that religion is advocated as a ‘cure’ for modern impartiality. For instance, Daniel is too tolerant; he sees everyone else’s viewpoint, but has no opinion of his own. Moments before he first encounters Mirah he is literally rudderless, ‘satisfied to go with the tide and be taken back by it’ (p. 188). Elsewhere Daniel’s ‘many-sided sympathies threatened to hinder any persistent course of action’ (p. 364). Religion provides a focus: ‘His judgement was no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy’ (p. 745). Daniel’s transition has some similarities to Goethe’s hero in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, which Lukàcs considers in terms of a ‘crisis of transition’. One could argue similarly that Eliot addresses a crisis of transition; scientific and philosophical concepts threaten religious doctrines.

In ‘Amos Barton’, where humanism transcends religious intolerance, Shepperton Church is fading while there is no alternative vision in sight: ‘that dear, old, brown, crumbling picturesque inefficiency is everywhere giving place to spick-and-span, new varnished efficiency … but alas! no picture’. In her last collection of essays Eliot recalls her own past fondly: ‘I cherish my childhood loves’. Her concern that national history and the ‘song that inspired [them]’ are forgotten suggests an anxiety about England’s collective national identity when much that had been certain was left disturbingly open. Deronda illustrates the dilemmas that originate in transformative cultural developments and looks to ways of preserving the spiritual wisdom that is encoded in religion. These are conflicting cultural forces, which are based on contradictory ideas that function in a creative tension. Neither can find full expression without the other. Without the ancient roots of humanity cultural developments are impoverished whereas traditions need to progress or else become stale.

Eliot looked to the way that Jewish teachers had preserved their distinct identity despite exile and persecution. Mordecai exemplifies such a teacher. His religious inheritance is encoded in the Hebrew language, which he recites to children, thinking ‘the boy will get them engraved in him, it is a way of printing’ (p. 476). As a student of Hebrew, Eliot would have sensed how language has ancient cultural concepts and values embedded even in its sentence structure. To speak a language is to encounter, linguistically, a cultural inheritance. When Daniel studies Hebrew, Mordecai sees this in terms of transmuting religious ideas: ‘My words may rule him one day. Their meaning may flash out on him’ (p. 476).

The question in Deronda relates to the attainment of a balance between the inherent exclusionism of religion and humanistic values that aim to give equality to all religious movements and ideas. But, as Eliot implies, the very act of giving equal rights to all religions contributes to the destruction of their intrinsic identity: ‘if they [Jews] drop their separateness which is made their reproach, they may be in danger of lapsing into a cosmopolitan indifference’. Evidence of gradual amalgamation was widespread and included the political enfranchisement of Jews in France, Germany and England. This conundrum echoes the problem of cultural pluralism in an age of increasing secularism: how to embrace new, alien
thought without the host community or newcomers losing their essential sense of identity. In *Deronda*, Jewish, Anglican and secular sentiments represent diverse sets of ideas that mirror each others' negative and positive attributes. But the general populace knew little of these Jewish communities that lived among them, and *Deronda* sought to change this with an otherworldly Mordecai, whose counterweight is the humdrum life of the Cohen family, which connects spiritual and intellectual life to community.

The reception of *Deronda* was, to a large extent, influenced by ideological preferences. English and European Jewry was enthusiastic about the first sympathetic narrative of Jews in English literature. Rabbi David Kaufmann's essay 'George Eliot und das Judentum' was translated into English in 1878 and became an authoritative voice on the Jewish reception of this novel. Kaufmann praises Eliot's knowledge of Jewish customs and literature and considers her characterization of Mordecai an accurate reflection of a people, 'true to life and humanity', and Mirah, a typically virtuous Jewish maid: 'a charming and fragrant flower' whose attributes are of divine rather than human making. Like Kaufmann, Piccottio sees *Deronda* as an endorsement of traditional Judaism expressed in realistic terms through Mirah, 'a typical flower of Israel'. However, Kaufmann's and Piccottio's reading does not reflect the full implications of Eliot's discourse. Their reading has the hallmarks of an authoritative view in the Bakhtinian sense: 'authoritative discourse permits no ... flexible transition' and so allows no 'play with the borders that define religious rules'. For instance, Picciotto objects to Ezra Cohen conducting business on the eve of the Sabbath. Kaufmann's and Picciotto's readings illustrate the dilemma of religious identity and its inability to deal with 'rogue', dissenting elements; those who transgress religious rules are denied true identity.

Eliot explores the tensions among dissenting elements with the Cohen family; they have a disavowed daughter nobody dares to mention. Lapidoth represents all the negative attributes of Jews in general, and his lack of redeeming qualities is an essential counterweight to equally unrealistic virtuous types. Mirah is relieved of traditional daughterly duties towards Lapidoth: 'he did not follow our religion' (p. 215). To transgress the rules and rituals of the closed world of orthodox religion leads to the expulsion of fallen members. Similar attitudes apply to Picciotto and Kaufmann, who consider secular Jews like Gideon and Pash shallow souls who 'care for nought but ease and self-indulgence'. In Kaufmann's opinion, Deronda's mother is an aberration: 'this female had the soul of a man ... Judaism was an oppressive burden to her', which Picciotto concurs with: 'she is cold calculating and ambitious ... denounces her faith as too narrow formal and rigid'. The only way to be a 'good' woman was to obey specific religious rules and attitudes. Deronda's mother raised questions about the validity of ancient rules in the modern world which Kaufmann was unable or unwilling to examine. Moreover, English society, too, imposes restrictions on its women; Gwendolen, for example, is told that 'marriage is the only happy state' (p. 29).

Much of what Kaufmann considers lovely and sweet grates on the artistic tastes of Anglican readers. The contrasting reception of Daniel and Mirah among English readers emphasizes the complicated nature of ideological tensions. Above all, some thought Daniel lacking in human flaws and therefore unrealistic: 'few men were able to keep themselves clearer of vices than he' (p. 364). Saintsbury calls Daniel a 'faultless monster' and observed that 'what is wanting in Deronda yet seems to supply to others', which panders to 'a provincial character which
excludes fellow feeling". 35 Hutton is irritated by the meekness 36 of Eliot’s character Mirah whose submissive life (pp. 200, 211, 215, 218) is touched by Divine forces: ‘God was warning me: my mother was in my soul’ (p. 220). Instead of an idealized maiden, Saintsbury preferred developing characters and for that reason he thought Gwendolen ‘an overwhelming success’. 37 But others saw in Daniel’s purity a Christ-like ‘saviour and redeemer’. 38 Daniel’s exceptional virtues appealed to those that sought to ‘restore’ sound religious elements to fiction. Thinking along those lines, Francillion inferred that Eliot was returning to earlier literary forms and universal truths: ‘romance, the natural history of exceptions and intensities, is as true as reality, and more true than much that seems real’. 39

However, Eliot’s position on religion, universal truths and culture must be considered by looking at the religious and secular strands of Deronda together, instead of viewing them in sterile exclusion, like those that see only two separate narratives in Deronda: ‘it oscillates between two plots’. 40 Eliot complained about those that: ‘cut the books into scraps and talk of nothing else but Gwendolen. I meant everything to be related to everything else there’. 41 Clearly, Deronda consists of varied genres and sentiments that expose each others’ shortcomings, intersect and make inroads into both entrenched positions. But religious proponents were as guilty of partial reading as secular ones. Kaufmann argues that the true message of Deronda is the popularization of Zionism: ‘the spiritual focus of her book is the longing for a future in which Israel is a nation’. 42 Hebrew translators edited out the English sections they considered a distraction from the Zionist narrative. 43 Similarly, Leavis saw a good and bad half in the novel, with Judaism making for ‘astonishing badness’. 44 ‘As for the bad part’, he argues that ‘there is nothing to do but to cut it away’. 45

However, dissecting Deronda in this way misses the dialogic nature of the work. On the one hand, Judaism is illustrated as a living, mysterious force: ‘something still throbbing in human lives’ (p. 363), which comes to life at the Sabbath table of the Cohen family and produces Mordecai, ‘workman, vessel of charity, inspired idiot, man of piety and dangerous heretic’ (p. 475). By contrast, the landowning classes are spiritually impoverished. The church has been converted into stables, which symbolizes the decline of religion. The traces of the past ‘four ancient angels, still showing signs of devotion like mutilated martyrs’ (p. 419) are the traces of religious echoes. Mordecai’s sincerity is in contrast to Grandcourt, whose ‘long narrow eyes expressed nothing but indifference’ (p. 111). But extreme positions are moderated when contrasting attitudes and lives touch each other; that is the defining nub of Deronda’s dialogic strategy. For instance, the Meyrick family aspire to a cultural life of tolerance and humanism. They illustrate the benefits of cultural and intellectual tolerance. When Mirah finds shelter with them, their broad Christianity is in dialogue with a Jewish identity. Mirah’s first words show an inverted religious bias: ‘I am a Jewess. You might have thought I was wicked’ (p. 200). But Mirah’s presence is an enriching cultural influence for the Meyricks: ‘we watch her and listen to her as if she were a native from a new country’ (p. 361) and the daughters accompany her to the Synagogue. Playful banter explores doctrinal differences (p. 362). Daniel recognizes that there will always be ideological differences of one sort or another and therefore: ‘we have to tolerate each other’ (p. 375). Klesmer embodies the ‘fermenting sort’ (p. 241) whose Jewish identity gives him an outsider’s viewpoint. As a musician he believes that his art can ‘rule the nations and make the age as much as any other public men’ (p. 242). Klesmer does not consider
Judaism an absolute or closed world; rather, he conducts an internal debate which questions existing assumptions as to the future of religion and cultural assimilation in host countries and as to what constitutes an essential Jewish identity.

A debate about Jewish identity is the main focus of a lively discussion in the ‘Hand and Banner’ where Deronda and Mordecai join a group of philosophers, most of whom have discernible affinities with Judaism. Mordecai speaks about a new Israel: ‘A land and a polity, our dispersed people in all the ends of the earth may share the dignity of a national life which has a voice among the peoples of the East and the West’ (p. 532). Mordecai predicts a nation that will contribute to the betterment of humankind, giving ‘back the thought as new wealth to the world’ (p. 526) and argues that a nation of their own will safeguard Judaism against the influences of host countries (p. 532). But this is countered by Gideon’s claim that political equality had superseded the need for such a homeland (p. 527). Miller, a man of reason, holds with the eighteenth century philosopher Moses Mendelssohn in arguing against the claim of the unique spiritual peculiarity of the Jews (p. 530). The rationalists among them think religious and mystical visions of a chosen land a hangover from the past: ‘... the restoration of Judea by miracle...has been mixed with a heap of nonsense both by Jews and Christians’ (pp. 533-4). Pash is more outspoken: ‘I don’t see why our rubbish is to be held sacred any more than the rubbish of Brahmanism or Bouddhism’, to which Mordecai replies: ‘no Pash, because you have lost the heart of the Jew’ (p. 534). Mordecai’s narrow definition of Jewish identity decides what can be considered properly Jewish and whose views are to be disqualified. The discussion in the ‘Hand and Banner’ centres on a conflict between progress and tradition, cultural development and doctrinal faith. By joining in the debate, Mordecai’s orthodoxy encounters contradiction, but he guards his spiritual roots from the corruption of ‘the angel of progress’ (p. 537). His stance illustrates the problems inherent in an idea of cultural progress which advocates tolerance and cosmopolitanism. The issue revolves around an undefined line which separates religious authenticity from religious intolerance on the one hand, and intellectual progress and tolerance from spiritual shallowness on the other. Eliot offers no ready solution to the tensions she identified other than the modifying effect of a cultural dialectic between religious and secular thought.

Eliot sought to connect the individual with the past in order to confer a sense religious identity from which the world could be encountered in all its cultural variety. She experimented with a sense of authenticity rooted in a broad framework of common values that could function dialogically alongside other ideological identities. As Bakhtin explains in his account of the discursive novel: ‘points of view are not mixed but set against each other dialogically’. Collision and tensions are at work, rather than assimilation. The aim, according to Bakhtin, is ‘the illumination of one language by means of another’. In Deronda ideological worlds, philosophical ideas, differing generations and the contrasting genres of realism and romanticism clash, and yet the potential exists for internal shifts and developments.

Saintsbury suggests convincingly that some of Eliot’s idealized figures lack ‘fellow feeling’ towards those outside the remit of their religion. However, Eliot does much more than reiterate established viewpoints and doctrines. Daniel, who has been brought up in secular England, does not believe in ‘pure’ authenticity: ‘our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races’ (p. 725). No single or coherent solution to the
conditions of life is imagined in *Deronda* and by contrasting opposing sentiments; some swear by progress while others look to the permanence of orthodoxy. Eliot exposes the dilemmas which are implicit in both viewpoints, neither of which can be fully endorsed.

Instead, Eliot’s fiction seeks to transcend the incompatibility of numerous ideologies and gives a voice to these contrasting views in society. The contradictory and self-critical elements in her works are intellectually valid and confirm the influence of German ideas, which she translates into an evolving cultural discourse. This is apparent in her early essays such as the one that advocates Otto Friedrich Gruppe’s edict: ‘the age of system has passed … the manhood of philosophy is investigation’. In the English context, investigation and critical self-analysis are a precondition for cultural development, which can only be achieved by countering common truths that tend to overlook internal contradictions. Rabbi Kaufmann, for instance, does not recognize the contradictory sentiments which run through his reasoning on the function of Judaism. He applauds the cultural contributions which Diaspora Jews have brought to their host countries: thus they enriched literature all over the world with their spiritual wealth.

While the Gentiles were enriched by the spirituality of settling Jews, Kaufmann seeks to protect Judaism from the corrupting forces of Gentiles, which would transform it into ‘a bleached jumble of skeletal remains’. The contradiction is in the assumption that cross-cultural activities are hailed as right for one people but not the other.

Picciotto sees intractable problems in a notion of Judaism which seeks: ‘to preserve in pristine purity the faith and traditions of Israel, without keeping up the inflexible rigidity which opposes every improvement … [the problems] are still awaiting a satisfactory solution’. Antithetical forces that need each other to sustain their own relevance are identified in *Deronda*; orthodoxy does not tolerate progress, yet progress without inherited ideas becomes meaningless. Bakhtin echoes this paradox which affects all authoritative discourse: ‘If completely deprived of its authority it becomes simply an object, a relic, a thing’. Seen from this aspect, Mordecai’s claim that a theocracy would invigorate Judaism is not far-fetched. The narrative in *Deronda* remains ambiguous because there are no valid answers to the questions that Eliot poses. Neither an irreligious Gwendolen nor Daniel, who pledges himself to a religious vision, provides a satisfactory solution. Rather, Eliot articulates tensions and problems as she sees them in her society; her exploration of how a culture can preserve its past whilst remaining accountable to the questions and sentiments of the present age. Her achievement with *Deronda* is to explore conflicting ideologies that illuminate the ethical complexities of the here and now.

In the context of the history of ideas, Eliot set into readable novel-form the contradictory nature of a cultural process where solutions to society’s problems cannot be thought of as conclusive but, instead, solutions create problems that will have to be addressed as they emerge. As religion came under increasing pressure, Eliot asserted the cultural importance of national and religious identity, whereas earlier novels questioned religious bias and intolerance. Throughout her work, Eliot sought to counter bias wherever she found it. Already in 1859 Eliot despaired of those that were: ‘incapable of comprehending … that which is essentially human in all form and belief. Freethinkers are scarcely wider than the orthodox in that matter – they all want to see themselves and their own opinions held up as the true and the lovely.’ Eliot calls for an affirmation of difference and a humanity that applies to all. Her strategy of dialogue, together
with critical analysis and an informed understanding of contemporary issues and religious narrative are, arguably, still an effective way to examine cultural tensions between religious, secular and national identity. For the sake of our common future, the cultural dialectic Eliot advocated is perhaps as relevant to the present age as it was to hers.

Notes


2 ibid., p. 302.


4 ibid., p. 311.

5 ibid., p. 324.


7 ibid., p. 272.


9 ibid., p. 10.


ibid., p. 137.

ibid., p. 146.

ibid., p. 148.


ibid., p. 69: ‘liebliche und duftige Blümlein’.

ibid., p. 61.


*The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 343.

ibid., p. 343.


45 ibid., p. 143.

46 *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 360.

47 ibid., p. 361.


51 ibid., p. 42: ‘bleiche aneinandergeworfene Gebeine’.

52 ibid., p. 416.

53 *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 344.