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## FROM GEORGE ELIOT TO HER 'RABBI': AN EPISTOLARY FIND

By Peter A. Brier

North Bank  
Regents Park  
Thursday

Dear Mr. Deutsch

I cannot be easy without writing a word or two this morning for I am conscious that I made myself more disagreeable than nature obliges me to be by my hard quips to you. They were not warrantable by anything but a strong personal and impersonal interest in that sensitive being of yours, which holds what may be very precious things in its keeping. And even with that warrant it will be a proof of your fondness if you quite forgive me.

You look wretched – and I have now so much of that subtle misery which can be explained to nobody, that I cannot help thinking of you as a sharer in that sort of suffering since you tell me there is nothing more severaly [sic] comprehensible as a moment (?) of melancholy.

We hungry, quick-wincing creatures who are always seeking our food with wounded tentacles, must simply accept life as a misfortune to our primary and direct self, and make up our minds that all our joy must come of working ourselves powerfully into the lives of other beings, or else giving ourselves up to be possessed by them. We may grumble and say that rosy and comfortable dejection is better than those sublime heights – but then we never shall be rosy and comfortable, some good is to be got by weary struggle, and by that alone.

That is not to tell you what you don't know already, O Rabbi, but it is simply the discourse of a fellow Houywhymn (spelling improved) who is bearing the yoke with you. We tell each other that the day is fine, & that the north east wind is biting.

You need not answer if you have nothing to say, which is a rare privilege in this world.

Ever yours faithfully,  
M. E. Lewes

The recipient of the above undated letter<sup>1</sup> by George Eliot is Emanuel Oscar Deutsch (1829-1873), a Silesian born Orientalist and librarian at the British Museum who befriended Eliot in 1866, a year before he published an important essay on the Talmud in the *Quarterly Review*.<sup>2</sup> Admired for his wide learning, Deutsch, whom Eliot often addressed in affectionate respect as Rabbi, is best known by readers of her novels as the inspiration for Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda*. To the best of my knowledge this letter has never been published in its entirety. William Baker, certainly the preeminent authority on George Eliot's interest in Judaism, shared sentences from paragraphs 3 and 4 with readers of his ground breaking *George Eliot and Judaism* in 1975. In a footnote Professor Baker remarked that 'this letter was bought by the London bookseller F. Edwards ... for an undisclosed American buyer. My inquiry, *TLS* 19

October 1967, failed to find the buyer of the full text of the letter. The extract is quoted from Sotheby's Catalogue, 12 November 1963'. The Sotheby Catalogue entry precedes the two paragraphs with an enticing epithet: 'a moving letter of self-revelation'. The letter is one of many by a vast range of prominent nineteenth century writers put up for auction by the American Academy of Arts and Letter's Archer M. Huntington Collection. No other letter by Eliot or Deutsch was included.

Whoever the 'American buyer' in 1963 was, the letter was purchased in July, 1967 by the Rosenbach Library in Philadelphia from Goodspeed's Book Shop (which closed its famous doors in 1993) in Boston. Elizabeth Fuller, the Rosenbach's librarian, has informed me that it is the only Eliot or Deutsch letter in the library's collections. I first became aware of the letter in 1996 while surfing the internet in the first months of my research on a book on Deutsch that I am currently bringing to completion. The Rosenbach had posted online an announcement of a 'current exhibition (How do I love thee? Letters of love and affection from the Rosenbach collection, on view 12 May – 20 October)'. Ms Fuller was good enough to send me a copy of the letter and included the short biographical 'label' on Deutsch accompanying the exhibited letter with the first sentence of the third paragraph attached: 'We hungry, quick -wincing creatures ...'. That sentence certainly underscores 'the moving ... self-revelation' the Sotheby Catalogue singles out as the salient characteristic of the letter. The tragic intertwining of vulnerable emotions and the defensive function of empathy as a protection against the annihilation of self resonates with the renunciation and metempsychosis at work in the great novels.

I was rather surprised not to discover this letter in Gordon Haight's definitive edition of Eliot's *Letters* (1954-78) – until I reflected on the matter and realized that Haight would have been reluctant to publish the fragment of a letter that no one could produce in its entirety. Nevertheless, I told myself that Professor Baker had certainly conveyed the heart of what the letter had to say – as long ago as 1975 and again as recently as 2000 in his entry on Deutsch in the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*<sup>3</sup> where he cites his own introduction of fifteen years earlier as its bibliographical source, which in turn clearly acknowledges the Sotheby Catalogue entry of 1963.

I saw no reason to blow the trumpets of discovery. When Nancy Henry encouraged me to introduce the letter to Eliot readers, I was willing to defer to her and let her do so in the context of her then forthcoming new biography of George Eliot. Most graciously, Professor Henry insisted that I take the first bow. The main reason for stepping forward is my conviction, after nearly completing my book on Deutsch, that the opening paragraphs of this letter are at least as important as its heart. The emphasis Eliot puts on Deutsch's importance to her and the ironic way she joins Deutsch's hopes for the future with her own literary destiny is somewhat startling.

The letter is undated, but we can assume it was written in 1869 or 1870. Deutsch's slowly developing stomach cancer rendered him 'wretched' and irritable from the late 1860s when he and Eliot first met, but his thin-skinned defensiveness at the attacks on his Talmud essay struck Eliot as a waste of emotions. He had earned such great praise when the essay first appeared in the fall of 1867 it was inevitable that malicious envy would eventually snap at his heels and charge him with plagiarism and distortion. While Eliot apologizes for having scolded Deutsch for hypersensitivity to his critics and polemical enemies, she grants him the purchasing power ('warrantable') of the very 'sensitivity' that makes him too vulnerable for his

own good: "They [her "hard quips"] were not warrantable by anything but a strong personal and impersonal interest in that sensitive being of yours, which holds what may be very precious things in its keeping".

To atone for her "hard quips" she flatters Deutsch by implying that his hopes of one day producing a great work on the Talmud which will propel it into the mainstream of western civilization are well supported by the very "sensitivity" that makes him despondent and melancholic. The somewhat puzzling combination of "personal" and "impersonal" suggests that she is referring not only to his own hopes of future production and creativity but also her own. This is reinforced by the one-sentence second paragraph which pursues the idea of the secret "sharer" – that his melancholy and hers, no matter how singular the suffering of each, involves a mutually held field. That which is "severally comprehensible" is individually distinct. In property law "severally" refers to "property owned by individual right, not shared with any other" (Webster's New World Dictionary).

It is, however, the genius of the shaping imagination to challenge the most sacred property right of all, the private domain of one's secret emotions and feelings. "I am Heathcliff", says Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, and George Eliot's main characters in *Mill on the Floss*, not to mention Daniel and Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda*, as well, of course, as Conrad's *Secret Sharer* are all examples of nineteenth century literature's fascination with the transmigration of souls – metempsychosis *before* as well as after death.<sup>4</sup>

As Milton and Keats have taught us, melancholy has its own rewards, and not the least of them is poetry itself. Deutsch's melancholy fed by illness, professional frustration, and the alienation of an unrealized nationality, influenced and shaped Eliot's sympathetic imagination. Deutsch's strong but vaguely conceived proto-Zionism inspired Eliot's literary masterpiece. What was several became mutual. The "very precious things" Deutsch's "sensitivity" had in its "keeping" included the great novels yet to be written by Eliot herself.

I say novels (in the plural) because if we are to believe Heidi Kaufman, not only Daniel Deronda but also *Middlemarch*, begun at the time she first met Deutsch and studied Hebrew and Jewish writings with him, is also laced with "Jewish discourse".<sup>5</sup>

Professor Kaufman argues that Deutsch's famous Talmud essay puts forward a cultural and social model that validates the bringing together of disparate things in a great "wilderness". The Talmud's yoking of law and lore in an interdependence serving "change and renewal" is contrasted to the defensiveness and intolerance of Middlemarch\_society, which constitutes, according to Kaufman, a "chaotic" wilderness of its own. Eliot, argues Kaufman, leans on Deutsch's essay as a platform from which to judge the shortcomings of English provincialism. I believe that Deutsch's appreciation for the "wilderness of the Talmud" is rooted in German Romanticism, specifically the ironic *Zerrissenheit* of Heinrich Heine.<sup>6</sup> For Deutsch the Talmud is a rhetorical and philosophical "wilderness"; its labyrinth opens to the imperatives of reason, ethics, faith and art. It is much more than just a blue print for social order.

Nevertheless I think Professor Kaufman is insightful in seeing a correspondence between Deutsch's tracing of the Talmud's intricate unfolding of Jewry's growing historical sense of its national identity and Eliot's critique of England's parochial resistance to the dynamics and diversity of its own national destiny. Ladislav's presumed Jewishness and other racist innuendos in *Middlemarch* do suggest that Deutsch was not just in the back of her mind when writing the novel. That Deutsch's "sensitive being" had *Daniel Deronda* "in its keeping" is, however, beyond dispute.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the Rosenbach Library in Philadelphia for their permission to reproduce the letter.
- 2 For the basic facts on Deutsch's life and writings consult the entry on Deutsch in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The original Victorian essay by Stanley Lane-Poole was revised (by the author of this article) for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) with an updated secondary bibliography.
- 3 *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 91.
- 4 In addition to William Baker's *George Eliot and Judaism* (Salzburg, 1975), readers interested in Eliot's employment of metempsychosis in her work should consult Saleel Nurbhai and K. M. Newton, *George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels* (London: Palgrave, 2002).
- 5 Heidi Kaufman, *English Origins, Jewish Discourse, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. Reflections On A Nested Nation* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); see pp. 158-161. Eliot's interest in Judaism predates by many years, as Professor Kaufman clearly notes, her friendship with Deutsch.
- 6 Eliot herself had remarked on Heine's strange mixture of 'wit' and 'coarseness' with an inspiring political idealism in her important essay on Heine written in 1856, long before she first met Deutsch.