Inheriting a Jewish Consciousness

Reading with a Sense of Urgency in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*
“It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning – the effect of brooding passionate thoughts in many ancestors’ (DD ch.63: 697).

I. Introduction

Forever circled in pen, marked off from the surrounding text, this passage remains months later, my point of entry into *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot’s final novel; a work ambitious in scope and resistant to definition, both celebrated and dismissed for its portrayal of Jews. Following his return from the Continent, his Jewish ancestry having been fully disclosed, Deronda describes this “inherited yearning” to Mordecai in terms that seem to suggest a heritable principle of racial or spiritual identity:

“Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up on a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind – the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch gives music. Something like that, I think, has been my experience.” (DD ch.63: 697-8)

Beginning here, at this particular notion of inheritance, I struggled with “the pastness of the past.”¹ I sought to understand Daniel’s inherited Jewish consciousness as the product of the novel’s highly-intellectual late-Victorian artist and her dynamically-evolving society, two sources difficult to resurrect from our current position, bound in time and space. Understanding eventually came through the writings of Eliot’s common-law husband, George Henry Lewes, and with this understanding, the recognition of an allegorical dimension of the work that I had not initially perceived. I came to see first, that the image of Mordecai dying within the Cohen house calls to be read as the Jewish soul or consciousness dissolving away in the healthy, yet ignorant assimilated Jew. Second, that the friendship Mrs. Meyrick and her children offer Mirah symbolizes the
political equality England extends to the Jews after centuries of prejudice. Emphasizing the threat Jews face through assimilation, these allegories assert a sense of urgency regarding the Jewish condition in England that has not yet been acknowledged even by the critics sensitive to Eliot's Zionism. Not only a reflection of Mordecai's vision of a physical return to Israel, this Jewish Nationalism is a reaction to/rejection of the ideal "tolerant" civil space, a central tenet of the Jewish and European Enlightenment.

This essay is divided into six sections. In section two, following this introduction, I acknowledge the influence of Lewes's theories of evolutionary inheritance in Eliot's writing. A number of critics have cited the importance of science in Daniel Deronda, and furnish me with a solid base of reference. Among these, I rely heavily on Stewart Hudson's dissertation "George Henry Lewes' Evolutionism in the Fiction of George Eliot," a careful study of Lewes' maturing evolutionary philosophy and its corresponding role in Eliot's novels, plotting its development through each of their works. The third section provides a historical framework for considering Eliot's presentation of the Anglo-Jewish community.

Having established this scientific and historical context, I suggest how it informs a sense of urgency through allegory: that through assimilation and conversion the Jewish consciousness is being bred out of the English Jew. In the fourth and fifth sections, I describe these two allegories of urgency, starting first with Mordecai in the house of the Cohens and then Mirah in the house of the Meyricks, emphasizing the novel's concern that Jews maintain their racial separateness. The sixth and final section discusses how this sense of urgency casts Daniel Deronda as a Zionist or proto-Zionist text, and considers Eliot's place in Jewish culture.
Despite this sense of urgency, there is significant ambiguity to the novel that resists any purely polemical reading. It allows for a critical response that, while sensitive to both the role of science and Eliot’s Zionism, ignores the call for separateness. In his essay, “Nations and Novels: Disraeli, George Eliot, and Orientalism,” Patrick Brantlinger emphasizes a cosmopolitanism in *Daniel Deronda*, what he defines as an “international nationalism”(272). According to this reading, Jewish Nationalism works to counter and critique “the narrowness of English national history and racism”(256). Using what he identifies in Deronda as a “double ‘national’ identity and heritage,” Brantlinger produces a definition of “race” that stresses “a sort of healthy mongrelization or miscegenation”(270). This in turn, leads him to a similarly selective reading of Eliot’s essay “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” in which the author’s Zionism is again read as secondary to the anti-imperialist stance it represents; in both cases, Brantlinger seems strangely aloof to the textual insistence on racial separateness.

In “‘Safely to their own Borders’: Proto-Zionism, Feminism, and Nationalism in *Daniel Deronda,*” Susan Meyer attends to the novel’s concern with maintaining “national boundaries”(755). Unlike Brantlinger, Meyer suggests the novel’s “proto-Zionist impulse” as evidence of “Eliot’s belief, at a deep level, in the inherent validity of imperialist domination of darker races, and the lack of concern with the well-being of Jews, indeed the desire for exclusion”(751). Insisting that “the novel is rife with anti-semitism,” Meyer concludes that Eliot’s invocation of Jewish Nationalism fits part and parcel with “British proto-Zionism as a whole”: a highly suspect ideology infused with imperial self-interest (750). Like Brantlinger, she ices her argument with “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” arguing that Eliot’s isolationist presence in *Daniel Deronda* swells to a
more sinister pitch in the essay, a "less polite and more disturbing image of national defense against alien intrusion"(755).

Despite the disparity in these two critical responses, I contend that both ultimately fall short for the same reason. By ignoring the novel's sense of urgency, Brantlinger and Meyer fail to recognize Eliot's concern for the assimilationist pressures arising from a liberal "tolerant" English society which necessitates the creation of a Jewish National State. By situating the novel within its particular context, this essay attempts to restore faith in Eliot's Zionism/proto-Zionism, in order to understand this ambitious last offering as something more complex than cosmopolitanism and more generous than isolationism.

**Inheriting a Jewish Consciousness**

"Unless parents transmitted to offspring their organizations, their peculiarities and excellencies, there would be no such thing as a breed, or a race"(Lewes, *Physiology* 315).

II. Understanding Eliot's "Inheritance"

Until the early twentieth-century – and the general acceptance of Mendelism – there was "no unanimity among biologists about the nature and cause of heredity"(Jones 78). In *Social Darwinism and English Thought: the Interaction Between Biological and Social Theory*, Greta Jones describes this as a period of oscillation. In fact, Darwin himself alternated between "Lamarckianism" and the notion of spontaneous variation and thereby, as Jones points out, "sometimes placed [himself] in an invidious and self-contradictory position"(Jones 79). Throughout his career, George Henry Lewes adhered to a modified Lamarckianism, emphasizing both the inheritance of "specific idiosyncrasies" and "general racial characteristics." In this first section I intend to show the expression of this modified Lamarckianism in *Daniel Deronda*. 


The body of criticism suggesting the general influence of Lewes on Eliot’s writing is so substantial that we need not make a case for it as likelihood. Both Hudson and Sally Shuttleworth offer far more extensive analyses of Lewes’ evolutionary theory and its effect on Eliot’s writing than is necessary for this essay. My primary objective in this section is simply to establish a context for understanding Eliot’s expression of a heritable Jewish consciousness, the implications of which inform the novel’s sense of urgency.

To this end, we find two instances in which Lewes’ modified Lamarckianism seems to double and illuminate Daniel’s developing Jewish consciousness. In the first, Lewes affirms the possibility of inheriting a “devout tendency” from particularly observant parents. In *Physiology of Common Life* (1859-60) – in a chapter entitled, “The Qualities We Inherit From Our Parents” – he suggests that it is conceivable that a devout tendency may be inherited from parents in whom devotion was a very eminent quality; because it is conceivable that a peculiarity of organization may have been inherited, which would impress this tendency on the mind of the child; but we cannot conceive of anything so specific as the worship of the virgin to be inherited, even after centuries of devotion. (342)

Lewes’ “devout tendency” reflects an emphasis on “acquired idiosyncracies” along with a post-Darwinian caution reflected in the final clause. As he outlines later in his *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874), Lewes believes in the inheritance of a “modified structure, and, with that, the aptitude to act in a certain way under certain stimuli” (PLM, I: 163). Thus, a child separated from his family may inherit from them a “devout tendency,” but without the necessary stimuli – immersion in a religious community – this tendency will remain unexpressed.
In the second instance, Lewes draws on the authority of Herbert Spencer (whose influence on Eliot’s writing is also worth noting⁴) to explain the existence of a “National Character.” As Stewart Hudson notes in introducing the following quote from Lewes’ essay “Hereditary Influence” (1856), this passage could “almost serve as a précis for Daniel Deronda”:

“Hereditary transmission,” says Mr. Spencer, “displayed alike in all the plants we cultivate, in all the animals we breed, and in the human race, applies not only to physical but to psychical peculiarities. It is not simply that a modified form of constitution, produced by new habits of life, is bequeathed to future generations; but it is, that the modified nervous tendencies produced by such new habits of life are also bequeathed; and if the new habits of life become permanent, the tendencies become permanent.” As a consequence of this inheritance we have what is called National Character. The Jew, whether in Poland, in Vienna, in London, or in Paris, never altogether merges his original peculiarities in that of the people among whom he dwells. He can only do this by intermarriage, which would be a mingling of his transmitted organization with that of the transmitted organization of another race. This is the mystery of what is called the permanence of races. (Lewes, “Hereditary Influence” 89-90)

Returning to the novel, we find this Lamarckian/Spencerian framework of thought reflected in Mordecai’s assertion that “the heritage of Israel is beating in the pulses of millions” living “in their veins as a power without understanding”(DD ch.42: 497).

According to critic William Myers, his speech suggests “the imaginative possibilities in Lamarckian theories of inheritance”: that such an impulse can be “secretly incorporated” into the physiology of an individual (216). To understand the full implications of this influence on Eliot, we must examine Daniel’s “inherited yearning” for instances of Lewes’ “devout tendency” and “National Character.”

While at first appearing merely a product of circumstance, Deronda’s yearning for affiliation reflects a latent tendency toward devotedness. Awakened as a young boy to the possibility that Sir Hugo may be his father, and a painful awareness of his mother’s
absence, Deronda develops a “many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any present course of action.” He longed to become an “organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit with a vague social passion but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real” (DD ch.32: 335-6). Later, in what seems like a disavowal of connection to race, the narrator actually distinguishes Daniel’s “yearning” from the Jewish consciousness: “[Deronda] had not the Jewish consciousness, but he had a yearning ... after the obligation of avowed filial and social ties” (DD ch.43: 506). However, when read in relation to Lewes and Mordecai’s “power without understanding,” Deronda’s yearning indicates a tendency toward devotion, but without the stimuli, the communal “ties” necessary for worship. Only after learning of his Jewish ancestry (and his grandfather’s extreme devoutness) is Deronda able to feel the “strongest tendencies of his nature ... rushing in one current” (DD ch.63: 694). In the quote that begins this paper, he rightly recognizes Mordecai, his Jewish teacher, as that key catalyst (my italics):

“It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning – the effect of brooding passionate thoughts in many ancestors.” (DD ch.63: 697)

Daniel’s “inherited yearning” includes both a devout tendency and a peculiar attraction to Jewish culture, the expression of his Jewish “National Character.”

He wonders at the “strength of his own feeling” during the service in Frankfort; later, when he recalls the experience to Mirah, she responds: “I thought none but our people would feel that” (DD ch.32: 346). At the Hand and Banner, Mordecai describes nationality as “a feeling;” Deronda later associates such feeling with Mazzini’s efforts to unify Italy:
“Look into Mazzini’s account of his first yearning, when he was a boy, after a restored greatness, and a new freedom to Italy, and of his first efforts as a young man to rouse the same feelings in other young men, and get them to work towards a united nationality. Almost everything seemed against him: his countrymen were ignorant or indifferent, governments hostile, Europe incredulous. Of course the scorners often seemed wise. Yet you see the prophecy lay with him. As long as there is a remnant of national consciousness, I suppose nobody will deny that there may be a new stirring of memories and hopes which may inspire arduous action.” (DD ch.42: 497)

Mazzini’s “national consciousness” allows him to envision a united Italian nation; Mordecai suggests such a “remnant” exists in the hearts of every Jew in the Diaspora. In terms echoing Lewes’ “Hereditary Influence,” he asks:

“What is it to me that the ten tribes are lost untraceably, or that multitudes of the children of Judah have mixed themselves with the Gentile populations as a river with rivers? Behold our people still! ... who carry in their veins the Hebrew blood which has maintained its vigour in all climates.” (DD ch.42: 496)

As this speech indicates, Lewes’ interest in the Jew as an exemplar of “National Character” is clearly shared by Eliot.

In The Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879), Eliot celebrates the “continuity of that national education (by outward and inward circumstance) which created in the Jews a feeling of race, a sense of corporate existence, unique in its intensity”(150). She further defines this intensity as an “uncommon tenacity”: “feeling peculiarly the ties of inheritance both in blood and faith,” the Jews have resisted being “rapidly merged in the populations around them”(152). According to Lewes, the existence of a distinct Jewish National Character depends upon this tenacity, resisting pressures to racially “mingle” through intermarriage.

Negotiating this somewhat “dated” conception of inheritance, we place ourselves in a position to refute Patrick Brantlinger’s insistence that “race” operates in Daniel Deronda “as more a cultural than a biological category”(270). He stresses a
cosmopolitan impulse in the novel, which he locates in the musician Klesmer – “who combines German, Slavic, and Semitic strains (270)” – and in Deronda. With ties to both English and Judaic culture, Deronda provides a perfect model for Brantlinger’s citizen of the world, “enriched by [a] multiple past, both genetic and cultural”(270). Though he correctly identifies Deronda as Eliot’s “ideal” Zionist, paying tribute to the value she places on communication between cultures, Brantlinger fails to recognize that her protagonist’s past suggests a definition of “race” that is both a biological and a cultural category. Certainly “enriched” by a multi-cultural past, Daniel’s genetic history is still a pure one: both of his parents are Jewish.

“The Modem Hep! Hep! Hep!,” the final piece in Eliot’s 1879 essay-collection Impressions of Theophrastus Such, stresses the need to resist assimilation. Invoking the Jew-hunting cry of the Crusaders, Eliot defends the vitality of a separate Jewish nationality – “the nationality which was the very hearth of our own religion”(151) – insisting that the “idea of Nationalities has value”(160). Though she admits the “tendency of things is toward the quicker or slower fusion of races,” Eliot suggests we moderate its course so as to hinder it from degrading the moral status of societies by a too rapid effacement of those national traditions and customs which are the language of the national genius – the deep suckers of healthy sentiment. Such moderating and guidance of inevitable movement is worthy of all effort. (160)

For Brantlinger, content to read “national” as a cultural term, this passage hardly impedes his argument: he sees Eliot merely offering a few cautionary words over the “traditions and customs” at risk in the otherwise joyous and inevitable process of cultural exchange. However, having established “national” as a racial term in Eliot’s vocabulary, we recognize that her admission is an urgent one. Unchecked, this tendency toward the “fusion of races” will result in the loss of all “national traditions and customs.”
Her concern with the degrading effects of assimilation has its parallel in the Anglo-Jewish community, where traditionalists and liberals debated/disagreed over the implications of Reform. Placing this novel in its scientific moment, we must also reconstitute its historical moment. *Daniel Deronda* reflects a Jewish community newly emancipated and suffering the birth pangs of Modernity. The concepts Eliot employs to present this broad and fracturing community suggest that she grasped well what later historians have identified as the forces that helped shape modern Judaism.

III. The Enlightened Jew: Emancipation and the Modern Jewish Condition

George Eliot wrote at the middle of what Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson refer to as “the long century of emancipation.” Beginning in 1791 – with the French National Assembly’s formal repeal of all legal barriers to citizenship “affecting individuals of the Jewish persuasion” – the period of Jewish emancipation extended on until the Bolshevik revolution succeeded in securing equal rights for Soviet Jews. In between these revolutions, western European Jewry achieved admission to citizenship and with that a belated invitation into Modernity. In *Paths of Emancipation*, Birnbaum and Katznelson admit the term is a “congested” one:

[Emancipation] is shorthand for access by Jews to the profound shifts in ideas and conditions wrought by the Enlightenment and its liberal offspring: religious toleration, secularization, scientific thought, and the apotheosization of reason, individualism, the law of contract, and choice. (4)

Though this process of Jewish incorporation varied distinctly between countries – “Paths of Emancipation” is meant to connotes “comparison and a plurality of passages”(11) – emancipation universally altered the Jewish condition. Reflecting an institutional commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment, emancipation allowed/required Jews to
engage with the wider non-Jewish world. Previously guarded and hostile, civil society now “welcomed” Jews in, presenting its newest members with a thoroughly-altered set of possibilities and problems.

At the center of this new condition were questions affecting Jewish solidarity: how to be Jewish and European? How to be Jewish and Modern? Post-emancipation Jewry responded to these questions by fracturing. In her notebooks, Eliot records this split in the Anglo-Jewish community: “In general the Jews are divided into 3 classes: the strict rabbinical, the progressists, & the ultra-reformers.”\(^6\) By freeing Jews from social isolation and offering access to civil society, emancipation “undermined the conditions that previously had underpinned Jewish cohesion”\((\text{Paths} \, 11)\). This issue of cohesion lies at the center of George Eliot’s textual interaction with Judaism, reflecting her concern for the survival of Jews within Enlightened society. By retracing these “paths of emancipation” – in particular, the one forged through England – we can better understand the novel’s sense of urgency.

In the Philosopher’s Club debate, Mordecai faces off with Gideon, a self-declared “rational Jew,” who argues that the Jews no longer need to remain separate now that they have secured “political equality.” Through a number of political reforms at the beginning of the 19\(^{th}\) century and culminating with political emancipation in 1858,\(^7\) the Anglo-Jewish community had achieved legal equality eighteen years before \textit{Daniel Deronda}’s publication. However, Eliot sets the novel in 1866; thus the “political equality” Gideon alludes to is less than ten years old. It is significant that Gideon makes the first direct reference to emancipation, for this “rational Jew” is a product of the Modern Jewish condition. Answering Mordecai’s call for a revived Jewish Nationalism, Gideon reflects:
“I’m a rational Jew myself. I stand by my people as a sort of family relations, and I am for keeping up our worship in a rational way. I don’t approve of our people getting baptized, because I don’t believe in a Jew’s conversion to the Gentile part of Christianity. And now we have political equality, there’s no excuse for a pretence of that sort. But I am for getting rid of all our superstitions and exclusiveness. There’s no reason now why we shouldn’t melt gradually into the populations we live among. That’s the order of the day in point of progress. I would as soon my children married Christians as Jews. And I’m for the old maxim, ‘A man’s country is where he’s well off.’”(DD ch.42: 489)

Within his response we find several of the conditions Geoffery Alderman associates with Jewish emancipation in Britain. One is the significant role Reform plays in the quest for political equality. Influenced by the religious reforms in Germany and dissatisfied with the growing authority of the chief rabbinate – seen as a voice of conservatism opposed to changes necessary to “modernize” Judaism – the Reform movement seceded and founded a separate congregation in 1840. Gideon’s call to worship in a “rational way” stripped of all “superstitions and exclusiveness” is similar to Reform’s interest in a “more sublime conception of Judaism.” The campaign for political emancipation was undertaken predominantly by Reformers, many traditionalists fearing that “political emancipation might lead to assimilation and complete loss of religious identity”(Paths 134). They based this fear in part on the Reform community’s willingness to alter tradition where it stood in opposition to “progress.” This included adopting English into their liturgy and abandoning any claim to a national destiny.

Gideon’s argument also suggests Eliot’s awareness of a social phenomenon historians later defined as the “Contract Myth”: “that the Jews of England had given up any claim to nationhood in return for civil equality”(Paths 137). Following emancipation, British Jewry felt compelled to project and preserve the image of an “assimilated and acculturated community, as indistinguishable from the host society as it
was possible for the Jews to possess in Christian Britain” (143). In concluding, “a man’s country is where he’s well off,” Gideon implies that emancipation necessitates the denationalization of Judaism. There is no question of dual loyalties or citizenship. For Gideon and the majority of post-emancipation British Jewry, England was their country, while Judaism was a “sort of family relations” (DD ch. 42: 489). Though conversion to Christianity was no longer required for a “ticket of admission” into European culture,9 political emancipation came at a price. As Alderman suggests by the title of his essay, this price was the difference between English Jews and English people of the Jewish persuasion.

For Susan Meyer, the “Zionist agenda of [Daniel Deronda] emerges as distinctly problematic” because it runs counter to the desires of 19th century British Jewry:

The Jews in Europe in the 1870s ... were still clinging to the goal of emancipation and full acceptance in the countries in which they lived. Zionism implied abandoning the local struggles against anti-semitism, and it did not have widespread support until after the horrors of the Russian pogroms in 1881. (750)

Still, Meyer seriously underestimates Eliot’s understanding of the urgent situation Jews faced in the wake of emancipation. Informed by both Lewes’ evolutionism – encouraging intermarriage in the name of “progress,” Gideon unknowingly contributes to the genetic dissolution of a distinct Jewish consciousness – and an awareness of the changing political climate, Eliot’s proto-Zionism reflects the same concerns expressed by the traditionalists. The loss of Jewish identity is the price paid in this cultural exchange. Eliot expresses this concern through what I refer to as “allegories of urgency”: certain key images in the novel that when read allegorically reveal a sense of urgency surrounding the preservation of a distinct Jewish consciousness. Having situated the novel in both its scientific and historical contexts, I will now propose an allegorical
reading of *Daniel Deronda*. Using the image of Mordecai in the Cohen household as a point of entry, this next section attends to Eliot’s representation of the assimilationist pressures Jews face from within their community.

**The Allegorical Sense of Urgency**

“Allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology.” (Fletcher, 368)

**IV. Mordecai in the Cohen household**

Before the episode at the *Hand and Banner*, where Mordecai first reveals his vision of a Jewish return to Palestine, Daniel speculates on the contrast between Ezra and the sorrowful, Jewish aristocracy that Zunz describes in his *Die Synagogale des Mittelalters*:

This Jeshurun of a pawnbroker was not a symbol of the great Jewish tragedy; and yet, was there not something typical in the fact that a life like Mordecai’s – a frail incorporation of the national consciousness breathing with difficult breath – was nested in the self-gratulating ignorant prosperity of the Cohens? (DD ch.42: 480)

Literally, the consumptive Mordecai lives under the Cohen’s care. Certainly, the passage also testifies to Deronda’s sympathetic nature: he notes that despite their vulgarity, the Cohens maintain a link with Zunz’s aristocracy because of their generosity in tending to Mordecai. However, keeping in mind the scientific context provided in section two, I suggest that we read this passage exegetically: Mordecai – “frail incorporation of the national consciousness” – is emblematic of a Jewish National Character or consciousness dying inside the healthy and acculturated British Jew. By attending to the complex figurative function of Mordecai in the novel, we free Eliot’s proto-Zionism from the imperialist ideology Meyer surrounds it with. Through this allegory of urgency, Eliot
identifies the loss Anglo-Jewry faces from its post-emancipation policy of assimilation and acculturation: the end of a distinct Jewish consciousness.

Even before the image of Mordecai in the Cohen’s home, Eliot prepares us to read his character as symbolic of a Jewish national consciousness. When Daniel first sees Mordecai in Ram’s bookstore, it occurs to him that precisely such a “physiognomy as that might possibly have been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the mediaeval time” (DD ch.33: 356). Immediately, Eliot frames Mordecai as a representation of his race through time: a combination of physical aspects transferred uninterrupted from first-century Israel to 12th-century Spain to “some past prison of the Inquisition” (DD ch.33: 357) and finally to this East End book seller. This historical framing continues throughout the novel and lends a sense of timelessness to Mordecai.

At the same time, Deronda acknowledges his extreme temporality. His age is “difficult to guess – from the dead yellowish flatness of the flesh,” and his “intensity of expression” may be the result of “some bodily suffering also, which involved that absence of ease in the present” (DD ch.33: 356). Ill health, tuberculosis, explains Mordecai’s “discomfort” in the present. Still, this description contains deeper meaning. As the representative of a Jewish consciousness inherited from his ancestors and “given shape” through a lifetime of accumulated study and thought, the unmarried, childless Mordecai is dying with no successor in sight. His interest in Deronda “seemed eager and questioning enough to be have been turned on one who might have been a messenger either of delivery or of death” (DD ch.33: 357). In fact, Daniel offers either possibility: the successor who will transfer on the Jewish national consciousness into the twentieth-century, or a final dead end, signaling the death of this national consciousness.
In chapter 38, the narrator provides a fuller depiction of Mordecai that further throws his symbolic nature into relief and emphasizes the urgency of his vision. He yearns for “some young ear into which he could pour his mind as a testament” (DD ch.38: 440). Reflecting on this yearning, the narrator observes:

It was remarkable that the hopefulness which is often the beneficent illusion of consumptive patients, was in Mordecai wholly diverted from the prospect of bodily recovery and carried into the current of this yearning for transmission. (DD ch.38: 440)

Mordecai the character becomes secondary to the prophecy he yearns to transmit; his individual physical health subsumed by the larger importance of maintaining the spiritual health of his people. The narrator plots this yearning as it grows “into a hope – the hope into a confident belief, which, instead of being checked by the clear conception he had of his hastening decline, took rather the intensity of expectant faith in a prophecy which has only brief space to get fulfilled in” (DD ch.38: 440). The novel’s urgency can be found in the interaction between the timeless and the temporal in Mordecai, his growing faith and decaying form.

Eliot uses Mordecai’s consumption at both the literal and figurative level to indicate the perils of assimilation. Prepared and seemingly destined for Palestine, Mordecai is called back to England by his mother, left destitute and daughterless by Lapidoth. Traveling cheaply in order to save money for his mother, Mordecai becomes sick after spending a night exposed to the elements. He tells Deronda: “Mine was the lot of Israel. For the sin of the father my soul must go into exile. For the sin of the father the work was broken, and the day of fulfilment delayed” (DD ch.43: 503). The “slow death” Mordecai suffers through the entire novel begins with this betrayal by his father, a self-
hating Jew, who keeps his daughter ignorant of her faith and nearly sells off her Jewish consciousness through marriage to a Gentile count (DD ch.20: 197).

More subtly, Mordecai's consumption figuratively charges Reform Judaism for its role in the loss of a Jewish National Character. In a state of prophetic anticipation, Mordecai spies Deronda rowing toward him along the Thames, the "face of his visions" fully realized. Alone together in Ram's bookshop, the two men create a tableau the narrator implores us to "Imagine":

the pathetic stamp of consumption with its brilliancy of glance to which the sharply defined structure of features, reminding one of a forsaken temple, give already a far-off look as of one getting unwillingly out of reach ... then give the yearning consumptive glance something of the slowly dying mother's look when her one loved son visits her bedside, and the flickering power of gladness leaps out as she says, "My boy!" – for the sense of spiritual perpetuation in another resembles that maternal transference of self. Seeing such a portrait you would see Mordecai. (DD ch.40: 462)

The imperative tone of the narrator compels us to examine the language carefully, and the result is fruitful and concurs with our exegetical reading of Mordecai. The "forsaken temple" suggested by his consumptive features recalls the Temple in Jerusalem, the former center of Jewish national and spiritual life, with an added twist. While Exile began with the destruction of the Second Temple, this temple is forsaken by its worshippers. Mordecai's "far-off look as of one getting unwillingly out of reach" is the result of his people separating themselves from their Jewish hearts, the spiritual and national centers within their chests. This metaphor also indicates Eliot's impressive understanding of the tenets of Reform, which included a conscious removal and/or de-emphasis of all references to Messianism and thus the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰

Equally significant in this symbolic reading is the pairing of Mordecai with a "slowly dying mother." With this metaphor, Eliot releases a number of threads. First, it
alludes to the maternal transference of Jewish ancestry, foreshadowing and subverting Daniel’s future encounter with his birth mother (unlike Mordecai, she only begrudgingly bestows his birthright). In addition, the sense of urgency flashes out again. In this tableau, Deronda plays the part of the “one loved son,” without whom his mother would leave no trace of existence. Until this deathbed visit, Mordecai and the Jewish consciousness he represents faced silent extinction, the last ancestor. This metaphor seems to raise the stakes: Mordecai symbolizes not merely that quality we might call Jewish national consciousness, but the Jewish national consciousness in its entirety. Finally, this metaphor hints at a second allegory of urgency more fully realized in the image of Mirah living in the Meyrick home: mother as a symbol for Israel. I intend to develop this allegory later in the essay.

At first it seems easy enough to neglect if not dismiss the urgency in Mordecai’s own rhetoric. Though Eliot goes to great lengths to legitimize his visionary status within the narration the prophetic speech acts themselves touch our sympathies rather than our intellects. However, with the additional scientific gloss suggested in the second section of this essay, it becomes impossible to ignore the urgency in Mordecai’s speech, or ascribe it simply to the dramatic coloring of an especially zealous character. Late in Chapter 40, Mordecai insists to Deronda:

“You shall take the inheritance; it has been gathering for ages. The generations are crowding on my narrow life as a bridge: what has been and what is to be are meeting there; and the bridge is breaking. But I have found you. You have come in time.” (DD ch.40: 466)

In accordance with Lewes’ theory of National Character, the prophet’s metaphor is appropriate: within his physiology, Mordecai contains and maintains the inherited characteristics of the Jewish race. Yet, just as in the previous metaphor, Mordecai also
emblematizes the Jewish national consciousness, the single, crucial thread from which dangles the entire Jewish race. In language that recalls his earlier meeting with Deronda on the Thames, Mordecai alters the equation: he substitutes himself for the Blackfriars Bridge, and in his place, the entire Jewish race now stares eagerly off into the horizon, searching for the salvation that Deronda represents. In addition, the speech enacts a symbolic framework to acknowledge the threat of assimilation: when the bridge that is Mordecai’s life finally collapses, the Jewish national consciousness will fall into the Thames, submerged, and lost in that thoroughly English river. A forsaken temple may be rededicated and a bridge rebuilt; but once Anglo-Jewry “merges” (intermarries) with its Christian neighbors, its National Character will be irretrievably lost.

Though this allegorical reading brings to light the novel’s strong concern with the dissolving effects of assimilation, some have characterized Eliot’s Zionism as decidedly liberal. In the Philosopher’s Club episode, she fashions an assimilationist position so persuasive that it leads a critic like Patrick Brantlinger to ignore the novel’s sense of urgency all together. The Philosophers are a group of tradesman intellectuals to which Mordecai belongs. Mordecai tells Deronda:

“I have pleased myself with a faint likeness between these poor philosophers and the Masters who handed down the thought of our race – the great Transmitters, who ... preserved and enlarged for us the heritage of memory, and saved the soul of Israel alive as a seed among the tombs.” (DD ch.42: 484)

Framed for us by Mordecai then, as akin to the great Rabbis of the Talmud, responsible for codifying generations of Oral Law while in Exile, the Philosophers are immediately re-framed by the narrator in racial terms that bear witness to the historic pressures of assimilation:
Miller, the broad man, and exceptional second-hand bookseller who knew the insides of books, had at least grandparents who called themselves German, and possibly far-away ancestors who denied themselves to be Jews ... Pash, the watch-maker, was a small, dark, triple-baked Jew; Gideon, the optical instrument maker, was a Jew of the red-haired type easily passing for Englishmen of unusually cordial manners.... (DD ch.42: 485)

These three personages function as case studies, the outcome of eighteen centuries of Jewish Exile. Miller's ancestors denied their Judaism in exchange for continued survival, sacrificing their unique inheritance by "intermingling" with their German neighbors: now the Jewish influence in Miller can only be speculated on. Pash and Gideon represent Jews whose ancestors endured the "yoke of oppression" to maintain their racial purity.

In the previous section, I treated Gideon's assimilationist argument as Eliot's representation of Reform Judaism. In returning to his speech (DD ch.42: 489), I intend to show how Eliot undermines this position. Advancing a program of assimilation and acculturation, Gideon concludes: "That's the order of the day in point of progress."

Similar statements were recorded during the Reform Rabbinical Conference at Frankfurt in 1845. On the "question of Messianism," the rabbis reflected: "the decline of Israel's political independence was at one time deplored, but in reality it was not a misfortune, but a mark of progress." Though her notebooks show no evidence of Eliot's familiarity with the Frankfurt Conference, Gideon's remark suggests she grasped well what kinds of arguments were in the air.

Understanding the link between secularization and "progress," we may locate Eliot's position in this debate; subtly, she proceeds to challenge the underlying assumption of Reform, that change equals development. Lilly, one of only three Philosophers "discernible everywhere as Englishmen," declares that:
“Change and progress are merged in the idea of development. The laws of development are being discovered, and changes taking place according to them are necessarily progressive; that is to say, if we have any notion of progress or improvement opposed to them, the notion is a mistake.” (DD ch.42: 488).

Immediately, Deronda exposes the faulty reasoning at work in this assumption. Our trust in Deronda, earned over the first half of the novel, and the loaded nature of his metaphor, signals authorial skepticism of Lilly’s pitch for development as progress:

“There will still remain the degrees of inevitableness in relation to our own will and acts, and the degrees of wisdom in hastening or retarding; there will still remain the danger of mistaking a tendency which should be resisted for an inevitable law that we must adjust ourselves to, - which seems to me as bad a superstition or false god as any that has been set up without the ceremonies of philosophizing.” (DD ch.42: 488).

At this abstract level, the novel opposes Reform Judaism on the same philosophical grounds as the traditionalists. In an essay outlining the principles of a “positive, historical Judaism” – precursor of the present-day Conservative movement – Zecharias Frankel concedes the need for religious changes that reflect “the spirit of our times,” but warns against “carrying progress to the limit.”13 Eager to rid Judaism of its “superstitions and exclusiveness,” Gideon and his fellow Reformers endanger their religious identity, an identity that Mordecai represents.

By pronouncing, “quite good humouredly,” that “the feeling of nationality is dying,” Pash condemns Mordecai, frail emblem of the Jewish national consciousness to death as well (DD ch.42: 487). However, Deronda offers a rhetorical rescue:

“A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life,” said Deronda. “Nations have revived. We may live to see a great outburst of force in the Arabs who are being inspired with a new zeal.” (DD ch.42: 488)

Defending the vitality of nations, Daniel produces a corresponding physical revival in Mordecai: “‘Amen, amen,’ said Mordecai, looking at Deronda with a delight which was
the beginning of recovered energy: his attitude was more upright, his face was less worn” (DD ch.42: 488). Later in this scene, Daniel distinguishes Mordecai’s Zionism from superstition, allying it with Mazzini’s nationalist movement in Italy. For Mordecai “Deronda’s words were a cordial” (DD ch.42: 497). In the face of such powerful opposition, Deronda’s expressed support actually sustains Mordecai, and preserves the sentiment of Jewish nationality that he represents. Though Eliot refuses to overtly critique either position through narration, the scene advances the novel’s allegorical sense of urgency and allows for a sustained articulation of Mordecai’s prophecy: a Jewish return to Palestine.

Before discussing what I see as the second “allegory of urgency” in the novel, involving Mirah’s role in the house of the Meyricks, I would like to address one further, controversial aspect of Eliot’s portrayal of the Cohens, the family of semi-assimilated Jews who give shelter to Mordecai. Eliot’s proto-Zionism is inseparably bound up in Lewes’ theory of National Character: the Jews exist precisely because they have historically maintained a central racial purity. The importance the novel places on maintaining racial separateness is suggestive of a larger post-Darwinian dialogue on race and class. Depictions that reveal this context – references to Jewish faces as “dark” (DD ch.42: 487) and “glistening” (358, 480) and comments about “chosen noses” (338, 431) – produce a feeling of uneasiness in a twenty-first century reader. Is Daniel Deronda an anti-Semitic novel? Susan Meyer contends that the novel is “rife with anti-semitism” which she locates in the dichotomy between the “refined” and the “vulgar” Jew. Alighting on a term repeatedly used to describe Mordecai and Mirah, Meyer defines the “refined” Jew as “one who has become more like the English” (Meyer 746). She
contrasts these “refined” Cohens – Mordecai, Mirah, and their memory of their mother – with the family of Ezra Cohen the pawnbroker, who in their “cheerful ruddy vulgarity” represent “what Mordecai and Mirah have been purged of, but also what they might have been” (Meyer 747).

In constructing a case for subconscious anti-Semitism in the novel, Meyer asks us to take some interpretive leaps. Because the argument presumes Eliot is unaware of her anti-Semitism and that it exists at a submerged level, I cannot absolutely disprove these claims. However, in the case of Ezra Cohen’s “vulgarity,” Meyer seems to confuse what is arguably class snobbery on Eliot’s part with the charge of authorial anti-Semitism. The narrator tells us that Deronda, during his second encounter with the Jewish pawnbroker, was

rashly pronouncing this Ezra Cohen to be the most unpoetic Jew he had ever met with in books or life: his phraseology was as little as possible like that of the Old Testament; and no shadow of a Suffering Race distinguished his vulgarity of soul from that of a prosperous pink-and-white huckster of the purest English lineage. (DD ch.33: 362)

Though he later comes to recognize a certain spirituality and dignity still present in the pawnbroker, Daniel’s first impression establishes Ezra as the extreme opposite of the dying prophet he maintains. While Mordecai symbolizes his nation’s poetic/prophetic consciousness, Ezra becomes synonymous with vulgar and commercial speech. Mordecai’s physiognomy implies the entire “Suffering Race,” poets, prophets, and prisoners alike; Ezra’s “soul” is in many ways indistinguishable from any English vendor. The disparity between “refined” and “vulgar” Jews may also indicate a strain of intellectual snobbery. Admiring the poor men of the Philosopher’s Club, who had “snatched knowledge as most of us snatch indulgences, making the utmost of scant
opportunity,” Daniel enters their discussion “with the quiet air of respect habitual to him among equals” (DD ch.42: 486). In contrast to this idealized working-class scholar, Ezra maintains no such intellectual aspirations. He tells Deronda: “I’ve had something else to do than to get book-learning. I’ve had to make myself knowing about useful things” (DD ch.34: 370).

Meyer also refutes all evidence suggesting that the Cohens’ commodification of Judaism is the price paid for assimilation. Referring to “one of the more offensive passages,” she pinpoints Eliot’s anti-Semitism in this description of the six-year old Jacob Cohen: “His small voice was hoarse in its glibness, as if it belonged to an aged commercial soul, fatigued with bargaining through many generations” (DD ch.33: 360). However, the novel provides a framework for understanding this description as part of a social condition forced on the Jews through centuries of prejudice. This framework is Mordecai’s poem, a figurative work imploring the angel Gabriel to free the Jewish soul, isolated by the “Goyim” (DD ch.38: 445). By instructing Jacob to repeat the Hebrew poem, Mordecai hopes the meaning of his words “may flash out on him. It is so with a nation – after many days” (DD ch.38: 444). His comparison of Jacob to a nation is immediately repeated in a tirade against assimilation. Induced by his pupil’s ignorance and lack of interest in the poem, Mordecai employs the same figurative language as in the poem to curse Jacob’s generation:

“They will open the mountain and drag forth the golden wings and coin them into money and the solemn faces they will break up into ear-rings for wanton women! And they will get themselves a new name, but the angel of ignominy, with a fiery brand, shall know them, and their heart shall be the tomb of dead desires that turn their life to rottenness.” (DD ch.38: 446)
In his poem, the Jewish heart contains “the buried ark and hidden cherubim” that he implores the angel Gabriel to release into the world. In his anger with Jacob – a microcosm for his anger with the assimilated Jew – Mordecai pronounces this heart dead; its hidden treasures, the “unchanged” faces of the cherubim maintained for centuries, sold for permission to “get themselves a new name,” to join with the surrounding Gentile nations. As the embodiment of this Jewish heart, vessel for the “unchanged” Jewish identity, Mordecai waits to be freed. After two years dwelling under the roof of Ezra Cohen, he seems destined to become a casualty of his own pronouncement.

However, the Cohen family – the second half of this allegory of urgency – has not completely lost their Jewish heart. As Mordecai later explains to Deronda, the Cohens “have the heart of the Israelite within them, though they are as the horse and the mule, without understanding beyond the narrow path they tread” (DD ch.42: 483). Provided for out of generosity, Mordecai – the Jewish heart – dwells within the Cohens’ vulgar, oblivious household; emblem of a threatened Jewish consciousness, he shines a weak but “refined” light on an otherwise acculturated and assimilated Anglo-Jewish community.

VI. Mirah in the Meyricks’ Home

The conversation at the *Hand and Banner* is not the first instance in which Eliot links assimilation with a notion of progress. Before encountering Mordecai, even Daniel assumes that all “learned and accomplished Jews ... had dropped their religion, and wished to be merged in the people of their native lands” (DD ch.19: 190). Identifying secularization with development – a tenet of the Enlightenment – necessitates a transaction on the part of Jews: full privileges of citizenship in exchange for giving up rituals and traditions that maintain separateness. This “rational” formula for assimilation
threatens both the Jewish consciousness that Mordecai represents and the Jewish identity Mirah clings to through the memory of her mother. Thus the Meyrick family, though they provide Mirah with sanctuary following her attempted suicide, are as dangerous in their misconceptions of progress as the Philosophers.

Keeping in mind the scientific context provided in section two, we recognize an exegetical dimension of Mirah’s role in the house of the Meyricks, comparable to Mordecai’s position with the Cohens. Mrs. Meyrick and her children offer Mirah the bond of friendship, the political equality England extends to the Jews after centuries of prejudice. In many ways it seems an attractive option, especially standing as it does in antithesis to an indifferent and sadistic empire embodied in the soulless Grandcourt. However, this friendship remains aloof and suspicious of the separate bond Jews maintain with Israel. Despite their generosity, the Meyricks must answer to the same rhetorical question Mordecai poses to the Philosopher’s Club: “Can a fresh-made garment of citizenship weave itself straightway into the flesh and change the slow deposit of eighteen centuries?”(DD ch.42: 490). Through this second allegory of urgency – in which Deronda again helps preserve the Jewish national consciousness – Eliot suggests the threat Jews face from even their most tolerant neighbors.

Our first encounter with Mirah is an urgent one, Daniel swooping in at the last moment to stay her suicidal plunge. Even before revealing her Judaism, Mirah alludes to the tragic history of her people, fusing their suicidal actions with her own thwarted attempt: “I know our fathers slew their children and then slew themselves, to keep their souls pure. I meant it so”(DD ch.16: 176). Later, as she describes her childhood to Mrs. Meyrick, this concern with purity becomes inseparably linked with her relationship to her
mother/Judaism, and the threat amalgamation poses to this bond. Stolen away by her father, Mirah writes to her mother “secretly,” remembering only the street name and that the family name “was Cohen then.”

Her surname is significant and attests to the breadth of Eliot’s study (see Irwin notebooks, 403). The name, “Cohen” indicates that Mirah’s family is part of the priestly line of Kohanim, presumed descendents of Aaron. In the ancient Temple, Kohanim performed all of the religious rituals during the festivals; they were the only individuals permitted to enter the Holy of Holies – thus coming in close physical contact to God – because of their ritual purity. Her father renames the family “Lapidoth” because “it was a name of his forefathers in Poland”(DD ch.20: 198). Removed from her mother and renamed – in acquiescence to European prejudices – Mirah constructs a secret relationship with her mother symbolic of the covenant Jews maintain with mother Israel while in Exile.

Though her father tries to convince Mirah of her mother’s death, she succeeds in securing an imagined space where her mother lives on. Thus maintaining her mother’s love, Mirah shrinks away “from all those things outside [her] and into companionship” with the secret world of her mother. In the Hand and Banner, Mordecai describes the same process on a national scale:

“when the plough and the harrow had passed over the last visible signs of their national covenant, and the fruitfulness of their land was stifled with blood of the sowers and planters, they said, ‘The spirit is alive, let us make it a lasting habitation – lasting because moveable – so that it may be carried from generation to generation.’” (DD ch.42: 493)

Selecting herself out of the chaotic and morally corrupt world of her father and his theater associates, Mirah endures her exterior existence for fear that “if I got wicked I should
lose my world of happy thoughts where my mother lived with me” (DD ch.20: 197).

Sustaining herself in this resistant state for years, Mirah is finally forced to leave after Lapidoth conspires to marry her off to a non-Jewish Count. Through Mirah’s physical aversion to the Count and the marriage’s association with money, Eliot couples intermarriage with prostitution. She returns to the theme of assimilation as a commodification of the Jewish inheritance through Ezra Cohen, but this association lacks the sexually perverse undertones of Mirah’s arranged marriage. Fearing the possibility of being left alone with the Count where she “could not get away from him,” Mirah recalls thinking: “God was warning me: my mother’s voice was in my soul” (DD ch.20: 203).

Mirah leaves her father for the same reason she attempts suicide, the same reason her ancestors sacrificed their lives at Massada: to preserve that purity, that connection to her mother and her Judaism.

Saving her from this sacrifice, Daniel places Mirah under the protection of Mrs. Meyrick and her daughters. To understand the Meyricks as a representation of a liberal England, it is important to acknowledge briefly another symbolic component of the novel: houses. In chapter three, the narrator expresses a wish that Gwendolen’s home at Offendene could “have been lifted on a knoll, so as to look beyond its own little domain to the long thatched roofs of the distant villages” (DD ch.3: p.19). Read as metaphor this superficial comment on the house’s physical worth hints at the narrow, parochial view of its inhabitants and the natives of Wessex. In comparison, the Meyrick’s home, though outside “very narrow and shabby,” inside contains a space for “a wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting and poetry” that reflects the liberal, and enlightened Meyricks (DD ch.18: p.179-180). Still, though emblematic of a

In the passage that suggests this symbolic threat, Mrs. Meyrick is distinguishing mother's love from friendship: "It is easier to find an old mother than an old friend. Friendships begin with liking or gratitude — roots that can be pulled up. Mother's love begins deeper down" (DD ch.32: 345-346). Her remark reflects back on Mirah and the Hebrew hymns she associates with her mother. Conscious of the connection Mirah maintains with her Judaism through the memory of her mother, this passage reveals the allegorical dimension to the image of Mirah in the Meyrick's home: Mirah and the enduring belief in her mother's love symbolizes the Jew's covenant with Israel. Mrs. Meyrick's metaphoric language — "roots" that grow "deeper down" — acknowledges the influence of contemporary notions of inheritance.

Having established the deep roots of mother's love, Mrs. Meyrick betrays the same faulty notions of "progress" that Gideon expresses in the Hand and Banner: that secularization is a sign of development. Responding to Mirah's declaration — "I could not make myself not a Jewess ... even if I changed my belief" (doubly true if read with Lewes in mind: only intermarriage can unmake a Jew and then only in the next generation) — Mrs. Meyrick asserts "cheerfully":

"No, my dear. But if Jews and Jewesses went on changing their religion, and making no difference between themselves and Christians, there would come a time when there would be no Jews to be seen." (DD ch.32: 347)

Though spoken with no malice, the lines to Mirah carry a threat and her tearful passion directs the reader's attention to the language Mrs. Meyrick uses: "It is the first unkind thing you ever said. I will not begin that. I will never separate myself from my mother's
people” (DD ch.32: 347). Eliot emphasizes Mrs. Meyrick’s naivété. Alarmed at Mirah’s outburst, she exclaims: “Mirah, Mirah, my dear child, you mistake me!” Indeed her speech indicates not so much contempt for Jews but a conviction that Judaism is no longer relevant. Though lacking the sinister edge of anti-Semitism, Mrs. Meyrick’s “cheerful consummation” still places Mirah’s Jewish consciousness at risk.

Lapidoth’s attempt to marry Mirah to the Count has its parallel (though thoroughly softened) in the “romance” Mrs. Meyrick imagines for Mirah with her son, Hans. Having “hoped, as her children did, that the intensity of Mirah’s feeling about Judaism would slowly subside, and be merged in the gradually deepening current of loving interchange with new friends,” she concedes some disappointment in the discovery of Mirah’s long lost brother:

In fact, her secret favourite continuation of the romance had been no discovery of Jewish relations, but something more favourable to the hopes she discerned in Hans. And now – here was a brother who would dip Mirah’s mind over again in the deepest dye of Jewish sentiment. (DD ch.46: 528)

Again, Mrs. Meyrick underestimates Mirah’s connection to her Judasim, as does Hans in his “over head and ears” love for her (DD ch.37: 431). He assures Deronda of its sincerity:

“I don’t found my romantic hopes on a woman’s sentiments … I go to science and philosophy for my romance. Nature designed Mirah to fall in love with me. The amalgamation of races demands it – the mitigation of human ugliness demands it –the affinity of contrasts assures it. I am the utmost contrast to Mirah – a bleached Christian, who can’t sing two notes in tune. Who has a chance against me?” (DD ch.37: 431)

Though Eliot de-emphasizes the gravity of this speech by giving it to the clowning Hans, the words transcend his witty, harmless persona to reveal a disregard for Mirah’s connection to her Judaism. By invoking science, even mockingly, Hans establishes a
correlation between Nature and racial fusion; his marriage to Mirah, predestined by the inevitable laws of science. Against the backdrop of urgency suggested in this paper, Hans’ final question looms larger than its immediate context: who has a chance against me? Who will prevent the Jewish race from complete dissolution, when it is the “tolerant” British who pose the greatest threat of assimilation?

As she does with Mordecai in the *Hand and Banner*, Eliot also uses Mirah’s urgent position with the Meyricks to warn against the practical application of certain Enlightenment ideals. After going once to synagogue with Mirah, Amy Meyrick – “who was much of a practical reformer” – asks her: “does it seem quite right to you that the women should sit behind rails in a gallery apart?”(DD ch.32: 332). Mirah answers yes, “with mild surprise” and then goes on to uphold the values of tradition: “I like what I have always seen there, because it brings back to me the same feelings – the feelings I would not part with for anything in the world”(DD ch.32: 332-33). With this exchange, Eliot acknowledges the self-abnegating role women play in Jewish culture. Though later allowing for this discontented female voice to speak through Daniel’s mother, Princess Halm-Eberstein, here at least the novel resolves the tension by preserving tradition. For a novelist so concerned with the societal constraints placed on women, this may seem out of character. However, Mirah’s response reflects the same conservative caution that led Frankel to a “positive, historical, Judaism.” The “feelings” that Mirah elicits from the tradition are the thing; even reforms in the best sense can have a devastating effect on religion.

Through the figure of Daniel Deronda, Eliot rescues Mordecai and Mirah from their urgent conditions. Indeed the novel’s sense of urgency lessens with Deronda’s
reclamation of his birthright, concluding altogether with his marriage to Mirah and their subsequent journey to Palestine. This gradual easing of tension can be traced through the physical descriptions of Mordecai. Huddled together, awaiting Deronda’s return from Genoa, Mirah observes her brother’s fragile condition: “looking, she thought, as he would look when the soul within him could no longer live in its straitened home” (DD ch.63: 694). With its strong emphasis on the temporal—“they sat perfectly still together … while the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and the light was fading” (DD ch.63: 694)—this scene acknowledges the pressing threat of extinction that looms with the dying light.

Reclined here, with “closed eyes and difficult breathing,” Mordecai’s position suggests the dying mother; but without Daniel bedside there is no possibility of transference.

Moments later this urgency is relieved. After Deronda enters and reveals to both: “I am a Jew,” Mirah falls to her knees (“as if she had been beholding a religious rite”) at the sight of her brother’s “now illuminated face, which had just before been so deathly” (DD ch.63: 695). The miraculous implications of this transformation are significant: Daniel’s declaration revives Mordecai. The “maternal transference” yearned for in their previous encounters can be fully realized now that Deronda’s Judaism is confirmed. No longer the last ancestor, Mordecai inherits both a son and a brother-in-law. By marrying Mirah, Daniel preserves the purity of his race. The novel’s sense of urgency ends with their wedding where the presence of Ezra Cohen and his bustling brood anticipate the future Cohen/Deronda children to be born in Palestine. Having ensured the preservation of a distinct Jewish consciousness, Eliot is free to conclude her novel with Mordecai’s death. No longer something to be fiercely resisted, death arrives peacefully—a “divine kiss”—and the poet/prophet and emblem of Jewish National
Character calmly accepts his material fate while alluding to his symbolic meaning:

"Where thou goest, Daniel, I shall go. Is it not begun? Have I not breathed my soul into you? We shall live together"(DD ch.70: 754).

VII. Conclusion: A Zionist Text

These allegories of urgency, the political expressions of Lewes’ evolutionism in Daniel Deronda, inform our understanding of “separateness and communication,” the novel’s proto-Zionist doctrine. The phrase originates with Deronda’s grandfather, Daniel Charisi. We learn from Joseph Kalonymos, that Charisi’s “knowledge was not narrow”:

From his childhood upward, he drank in learning as easily as the plant sucks up water … He travelled to many countries, and spent much of his substance in seeing and knowing. What he used to insist on was the strength and wealth of mankind depended on the balance of separateness and communication, and he was bitterly against our people losing themselves among the Gentiles; ‘It’s no better, said he, ‘than the many sorts of grain going back from their variety into sameness’”(DD ch.60: 672).

Though attributed to a “controversial” character, whose staunch and autocratic adherence to tradition results in his daughter’s complete rejection of Judaism,¹⁶ this doctrine of balance between separateness and communication permeates the entire novel. In the Hand and Banner, it hovers just below the surface of Mordecai’s rhetoric. Time and again he locates Zion in terms of its relationship to East and West, the “world [that] will gain as Israel gains [for] there will be a community … which carries the culture and sympathies of every great nation in its bosom”(DD ch.42: 496-7). Though he both champions and symbolizes Jewish Nationalism, Mordecai also stresses the importance of communication. He tells Deronda: “I went to Hamburg to study, and afterwards to Gottingen, that I might take a larger outlook on my people, and on the Gentile world, and drink knowledge at all sources”(DD ch.40: 464).
This same urge, to “drink knowledge at all sources,” prompts Daniel’s leaving Cambridge; he tells Sir Hugo: “I want to be an Englishman, but I want to understand other points of view. And I want to get rid of merely English attitudes in studies” (DD ch.16: 168). With his “many-sided sympathy” finally rooted in a fixed sense of duty, Daniel comes to embody this doctrine of separateness and communication. However, citing Deronda, cultural insider and outsider, as a locus for this ideal condition, critics like Brantlinger nevertheless misread or under-read “race” and its importance in the novel. Following a tempting modern liberal tendency to focus on the novel’s enthusiasm for “communication” these readers underestimate the seriousness with which it simultaneously endorses “separateness.”

In her introduction to *George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda Notebooks*, Jane Irwin provides a keen and concise reading of this proto-Zionist doctrine:

> The reduction of different beliefs to common denominators, may improve religious tolerance and may be a short-term strategy for survival [but a] diversity of views is essential for ‘separateness with communication,’ a reforming process which leads to ever more diversity. (Xxxvii)

This is not the oppressive orthodoxy that the Princess shrinks away from, nor is it the Christianizing of Judaism; this “separateness with communication” represents a third road, and Deronda’s unique perspective as both outsider and insider is essential to such a course. However, the “separateness” in this equation is what makes *Daniel Deronda* a Zionist or proto-Zionist text. The novel’s “proto-Zionist impulse” takes apart those intellectual, progressive, spaces — Gideon’s “country” and the “wide-glancing” Meyrick home — to reveal the danger and anti-Semitism within. Thus Meyer’s claim — that this impulse reveals Eliot’s own anti-Semitism and “lack of concern with the well-being of Jews” (751) — though provocative, ultimately falls short. These allegories of urgency
indicate the author’s keen awareness of the dangers lurking in even the most unlikely 
places. By rejecting the tolerable and tolerant communities in favor of Jewish 
Nationalism, George Eliot anticipates the “intellectual substance of Zionism”: the 
rejection of Exile.17

Though this essay attempts to understand the implications of “inheriting” and 
preserving a Jewish consciousness in Daniel Deronda, it also exposes the Jewish 
consciousness preserved “within the borders” of the novel. Of course, this consciousness 
is Eliot’s. Formed not from the transfer of genetic material, but from her researches into 
Jewish history and Jewish thought, Eliot’s culturally “inherited” Jewish consciousness 
suggests an understanding of inheritance completely contradictory to the biological one I 
have spent almost a year struggling to make sense of. This notion of inheritance as 
something developed through acts of learning and sympathy, seems all too relevant in 
this era of cultural studies, where every critic writing outside his/her own culture faces 
questions of authority. Did Eliot succeed in this act of interpretation? Does Daniel 
Deronda capture something authentic about the modern Jewish experience? A brief look 
into the novel’s contemporary Jewish reception is telling. In his review for Gentleman’s 
Magazine (1876), the English Jew and writer James Picciotto celebrates Eliot’s act of 
cultural translation:

A great novelist of non-Jewish extraction … has acquired an extended and 
profound knowledge of the rites, aspirations, hopes, fears, and desires of the 
Israelites of the day. She has read their books, inquired into their modes of 
thought, searched their traditions, accompanied them to the synagogue; nay, she 
has taken their very words from their lips, and … has unroofed their houses.18

Though 125 years earlier, Picciotto’s experience of Daniel Deronda mirrors my own: 
after one reading I felt my house similarly unroofed. Certainly impressed by her complex
renderings of cultural observance – the Cohen’s celebration of the Sabbath, the orthodox synagogue in Frankfurt – it is her representation of this united-but-divided people, of Jewish sectarianism, that continues to strike me in a very real and personal way. Critic Marilyn Butler writes, “the intentions and attitudes which are embedded in past writing can interrogate our own, if we will let them”(44). The discussion in the Hand and Banner, while capturing the give and take of Talmudic argument central to Judaism, can also “interrogate” the divisive elements at work in the Jewish community that have been and continue to be so self-destructive.

In a letter to John Blackwood, Eliot wrote that she had received word from “a statesman who shall be nameless” thanking her for “[kindling] in him a quite new understanding of the Jewish people.” She continues:

This is what I wanted to do – to widen the English vision a little in that direction and let in a little conscience and refinement. I expected to excite more resistance of feeling than I have seen the signs of, but I did what I chose to do – not as well as I should have liked to do it, but as well as I could. (VI: 304)

This letter, characteristic of the sensitive and self-deprecating persona Eliot presents in her correspondence, suggests her intent in writing Daniel Deronda was to “widen” her readers’ sympathies and perhaps even create a dialogue between the Jewish and Gentile communities. Whether or not she succeeded in this task, in the act of interpretation, Eliot inherited her own Jewish consciousness; in attempting to understand this inheritance, I hope I have preserved it as well.
Jews were permitted to occupy the positions of lord chancellor or lord lieutenant for Britain: An Encyclopedia, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 44.


3 Also known as “use-inheritance,” Lamarckianism attributes changes in heredity to adaptations that an organism makes to adjust itself to changing environmental conditions. Lamarckianism Inheritance can be “somewhat crudely epitomized in the popular belief that giraffes were able to develop long necks to get at the leaves in the trees, and then pass the acquired long necks on to their progeny.” Hudson, 34.


5 Brantlinger excerpts this quote from Darwin’s Plots. In her discussion of inheritance in the novel, Gillian Beer examines the significance of “breeding” in a cultural sense. However, this does not preclude its use in a biological sense: “Daniel, whose ‘breeding’ makes him an English gentleman by virtue of Sir Hugo Mallinger’s upbringing, discovers his true inheritance through his Jewish past and through his matrilineal succession to Judaic culture”(187-88). Certainly “enriched” by his English upbringing, Deronda’s access to Judaic culture is his “true” genetic inheritance. According to Beer, “race” for Eliot is both a cultural and a biological category. Brantlinger seems strangely aloof to this context.


7 Full Jewish emancipation arrived “in stages. In 1858 Lionel de Rothschild was permitted to assume his seat in the [House of] Commons without taking the offensive oath, ‘by the true faith of a Christian.’ In 1870 Jews were permitted to matriculate at the universities. Emancipation was completed in 1890 when Jews were permitted to occupy the positions of lord chancellor or lord lieutenant for Ireland.” Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia, Sally Mitchell, ed., s.v. “Jewry and Judaism.”


9 Explaining his conversion to Christianity, the German-Jewish poet and essayist Heinrich Heine wrote: “the Baptismal certificate is the ticket of admission to European culture.” Hoping his conversion would facilitate a career as a civil servant or academic, Heine was repeatedly disappointed and left Germany for Paris in 1831 after failing to obtain a promised chair at the University of Munich. Heinrich Heine, Heinrich Heine: A Biographical Anthology, ed. Hugo Bieber, trans. M. Hadas (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), 196

10 This effort to de-emphasize the Temple’s importance included naming congregations “temples” – as opposed to “synagogues” – indicating that Jewish life was no longer centered in Israel but spread throughout the Modern world.

11 In chapter 40, the narrator compares Mordecai’s “exultation” upon recognizing Deronda from the bridge – thus fulfilling his “inward prophecy” – with “that of the experimenter bending over the first stirrings of change that correspond to what in the fervour of concentrated prevision his thought has foreshadowed”(DD ch.40: 460). For a more sustained analysis of the ways in which the narrative is structured to “endorse ideas of visionary power,” see Shuttleworth, 175-200.

12 It is worth noting that in Frankfurt, Daniel rejects the “fine new building of the Reformed” for the orthodox synagogue; there he hears the “liturgy of the Day of Reconciliation,” a plea for Messianic return that moves him though he is unable to understand the Hebrew (DD ch.32: 338-9).

13 For the abridged essay, see The Jew in the Modern World 194-197

14 In one such leap, Meyer argues that the analogy between Mordecai and Columbus in chapter 38 suggests Eliot’s belief in the inferiority of Jews: “Not only did Columbus pave the way for European exploitation and extermination of darker races in the new world, but he used money confiscated from Jews who had been forcibly converted or expelled from Spain, provided to him by Ferdinand and Isabella, in order to fund his voyage”(751). Though the comparison is “particularly disconcerting” to a twenty-first century reader aware of Columbus’ imperialist prejudices, it seems a stretch to assume Eliot would have had the same consciousness in 1876.
In chapter 48, Eliot compares Grandcourt and his mastery of Gwendolen with Governor Eyre and the Morant Bay rebellion: “If this white-handed man with the perpendicular frame had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries. He had certainly ability, would have understood that it was safer to exterminate than to cajole superceded properties, and would not have flinched from making things safe in that way.” (DD ch.48: 552). For a more in-depth analysis of this allegorical relationship see Derek Miller, “Daniel Deronda and Allegories of Empire,” in George Eliot and Europe, ed. John Rignall (Hants, England: Scolar, 1997.)

Condemned to the narrow lot of “the Jewish woman,” Princess Halm-Eberstein’s embittered testimony offers the novel’s most direct and scathing critique of traditional Judaism.

In his article on “Exile,” Jewish historian Ben Halpern emphasizes that the “Zionist attitude begins with a lively awareness and affirmation of Exile as a condition.” Recognizing this condition as detrimental to continued Jewish existence, Zionism rejects Exile. See The Jew in the Modern World, 529-531.

Works Cited:


Works Consulted:


