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DANIEL DERONDA :

GEORGE ELIOT'S "NEGRO NOVEL"

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Daniel Deronda, G.H. Lewes once rather ingenuously explained, was "all about English ladies and gentlemen with the scene laid in Wiltshire" (Letters 6:136)². . . and although the novel is evidently "about" far more than that, Lewes' words are a useful reminder that Deronda gains his entree to the world of the novel as a gentleman, the ward of Sir Hugo Mallinger, and not as a political figure : a believer in a Palestinian homeland for the Jews. It is necessary for the novel that he believe in something, of course; as R.T. Jones has commented, "In order to have the moral authority that can challenge Gwendolen's superficial complacency, Deronda must himself be capable of devoting himself entirely to a worthy cause".¹ But nothing in the novel requires that the cause be a foreshadowing of Zionism. Why, then, does Deronda find himself committed to the idea of a Jewish national home?

Part of the answer has long been evident. Eliot was interested in the sense of national and racial destiny which grips Deronda, and she had elaborated upon this theme eight years before in The Spanish Gypsy (1868), in which the heroine finds that she has both gypsy blood and a mission to her people.

Further, Eliot had been personally enthusiastic about the idea of the restoration of the Jews to Palestine ever since meeting Emmanuel Deutsch - a passionate advocate of the return. "Do not

1 George Eliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.112 44

distrust your call," she had written to him in 1868: "I believe in it still". (Letters 4:446) But neither The Spanish Gypsy and its sources nor Deutsch (and the impressive reading list on Jewish history that Eliot worked through when preparing to write Daniel Deronda) fully account for the highly political vision Deronda inherits from his mentor in Judaism, Mordecai. Eliot's source for the politics of the novel was the fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and in all probability it was also reading Stowe that persuaded Eliot to address a Jewish theme.

Eliot read at least two novels by the American: Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly (1852) and Dred: A Tale of the Great Dreadful Swamp (1856). The former she presumably read with the rest of London in 1852; certainly she had read it before writing Daniel Deronda. She refers to it in a review essay for the Westminster Review in 1856 ... "whatever else (Stowe) may write, or may not write, 'Uncle Tom' ... will assure her a place in (the) highest rank of novelists" (Essays, p.326) ... and writes to Stowe, on October 29, 1876, that Daniel Deronda was, like Stowe's best-seller, an attempt to arouse imaginative sympathy for races who "differ from (us) in customs and beliefs". (Letters 6:301) As for Dred, it was one of the novels Eliot was reviewing in the 1856 essay already noted. In an 1872 letter to Stowe, Eliot was to admit that she had "dwelt on the descriptions in 'Dred' with much enjoyment" (Letters 5:280); in the essay of sixteen years before, however, Eliot had praised the novel in much more extravagant terms ... seeing it as possessing "uncontrollable power" and being inspired "by a rare genius". (Essays, pp. 325-26)

Eliot read, enjoyed, and then drew upon these novels. When, in 1856, she had lashed out against "Silly

if Eliot turned to the American's works for more specific inspiration. Possibly she did so for the plot of Daniel Deronda: it seems to be more than coincidentally similar to that of Dred. Certainly she did so for Mordecai's philosophy, for it has been taken wholesale from Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Although Dred is ostensibly the narrative of a slave rebellion, with Dred himself, a fugitive slave whom Stowe sees as a Hebraic warrior prophet, the principal figure, the novel is also the story of a young Southern girl, Nina Gordon, who is brought to realise, by the solemn advice of Henry Clayton (her fiancée), that her natural frivolity and extravagance should be subordinated to a social conscience; and of Clayton's own decision to give up his work as a lawyer to work for the uplift of the blacks. In Daniel Deronda we not only have in Mordecai a character explicitly modelled on the type of the Old Testament prophets, possessing an intense religious spirit and a political dream; we also have Gwendolen Harleth: young, frivolous and extravagant like Nina Gordon, and a member, even if strictly speaking only by marriage, of the country set ... the English equivalent of Nina's plantation aristocracy. Gwendolen is advised by Deronda, who perpetually hovers on the brink of romantic involvement with her, and is reading for the bar when he discovers that his vocation is to ameliorate the condition of the Jews. The evident similarities between these two plots, though hardly conclusive proof of borrowing, are suggestive - particularly in view of Eliot's enthusiasm for Dred.

As for Uncle Tom's Cabin, there can hardly be any doubt that Eliot did turn to it in writing Daniel Deronda when she needed to fill out Mordecai's

that Liberia would roll "the tide of civilisation and Christianity" throughout Africa. Deronda and Mordecai looked to "the new Judea" to symbolise "covenant and reconciliation to the whole world": it was to be "a power and organ in the body of nations", a republic where the Jewish spirit manifested itself.

The way in which Mordecai echoes Harris's phrasing is in itself convincing evidence that Eliot was following Stowe's lead. But even more impressive is the fact that all of Mordecai and Deronda's ideas on Jewish destiny and the return are either expressed or implied in Harris's reflections. Mordecai's way of solving the Jewish question was eclectic, if not totally esoteric, in 1876; Eliot could not have found his blend of spiritual and political nationalism in any of the Jewish sources she consulted before starting work on the novel, and, such was the state of flux in contemporary thinking about the return, it is extremely unlikely that she would have found his program in any one Jewish source. But Mordecai's ideas were the commonplaces of the colonisation movement - ideas which we know that Eliot came across in Stowe's popularisation of the case for the Liberian colony. For Mordecai's argument to be offered in a single work which Eliot admired and sought to emulate, makes that work her source beyond any reasonable doubt. In short, when Eliot was casting around for Deronda's cause "the enchantments of (Stowe's) genius" were still working their spell.

2. The George Eliot Letters ed. G.S. Haight
9 vols. Yale University Press.

