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Lord Byron and George Eliot:

Embracing National Identity in *Daniel Deronda*

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*And when shall Israel lave her bleeding feet?
And when shall Zion's songs again seem sweet?
And Judah's melody once more rejoice
The hearts that leap'd before its heavenly voice?*

*Tribes of the wandering foot and weary breast,
How shall ye flee away and be at rest!
The wild-dove hath her nest—the fox his cave—
Mankind their country—Israel but the grave!*

(Byron, "Oh Weep For Those")

Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, published in 1815, were written as part of his musical collaboration with the Jewish composer Isaac Nathan. Even though anti-Semitism ran rampant through England during the Romantic period, Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* remain his most widely respected collection. Despite anti-Semitic prejudice in England during the nineteenth-century, Byron was not the only English writer to take up the Jewish plight as his subject matter. Almost sixty years later, George Eliot would take up a similar set of themes in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. Significantly, Eliot's novel not only discusses the Jewish desire for a homeland in detail, it does so with numerous, specific references to Byron and his works. Eliot uses both the Jewish plot of *Daniel Deronda* and Byron as agents to discuss how Victorian England could revive its own national character.

Before discussing how Byron functions in *Daniel Deronda*, it is first necessary to establish his character as an important backdrop within the novel. Byron appears in *Daniel Deronda* in two basic ways. First, Eliot, who read widely of Byron's works as did most Victorians, creates scenes strongly mirroring those found in Byron. Eliot also

subtly references his works, especially the Oriental tales. An example of the former is found in chapter 16, where Eliot describes Deronda surveying family portraits. Eliot writes: "Two rows of these descendents [...] looked down in the gallery over the cloisters on the nephew Daniel as he walked there: men in armour with pointed beards [...] pinched ladies in hoops and ruffs [...] grave-looking men in black velvet [...] and frightened women holding little boys by the hand" (165). A strikingly similar scene is described in stanza XI of Byron's *Lara*.

He turn'd within his solitary hall
And his high shadow shot along the wall:
There were the painted forms of earlier times,
'Twas all they left of virtues or of crimes,
Save vague tradition; (lines 181-185)

Other examples of direct reference include when Eliot has Isabel inventing a "corsair or two to make an adventure that might end well" (708, emphasis mine) and mentions that "Hans was wont to make merry with his own arguments, to call himself a *Giaour*, [...] but he believed a little in what he laughed at" (731, emphasis mine).

Byron also appears in *Daniel Deronda* as a man himself. That is, Byron's personal myth finds its way into the novel. Significantly, the opening scene of the novel in which Deronda sees Gwendolen gambling is based on Eliot's own witnessing of Miss Leigh gambling in Homburg, 28 September 1872. George Henry Lewes' diary mentions "Miss Leigh (Byron's granddaughter) having lost 500 [pounds] looking feverishly excited. Painful sight." (GHL 1872 Diary). George Eliot also mentions this scene, in a letter to John Blackwood, as "the saddest thing to be witnessed" (GEL V 314). But more than this, Byron himself figures in the novel. For instance, in chapter 11, Eliot writes, "Lord Brackenshaw, who was something of a *gourmet*, mentioned Byron's opinion that a woman should never be seen eating—introducing it with a confidential—"The fact is' – as if he were for the first time admitting his concurrence in that sentiment of the refined poet" (116).

Moreover, Eliot reveals many ways in which Byron and Deronda are alike. Sir Hugo's The Abbey, the orphaned Deronda's home, is very similar to Byron's ancestral home Newstead Abbey. Eliot describes Sir Hugo's home as "one of the finest in

England, at once historical, romantic, and home-like: a picturesque architectural outgrowth from an abbey, which had still remnants of the old monastic trunk" (165). Byron's Newstead Abbey, which Sir John received from Henry VIII "preserved much of the original structure and the monastic layout. The cloister still remains at the heart of the building. Likewise, the impressive 13th-century west wall of the priory church continues to enhance the size and grandeur of the entrance front" (Newstead Abbey 4). Further, Byron fostered the ghost stories about Newstead when he had visitors, just as Sir Hugo does in chapter 35. He says at dinner, "'There used to be rows of Benedictines sitting where we are sitting. Suppose we were suddenly to see the lights burning low and the ghost of the old monks rising behind all our chairs!'" (Eliot 408). Finally, it is well known that Byron kept a menagerie of animals during his years at Newstead Abbey. According to a brochure made available at Newstead Abbey, "Byron's tame bear and wolf kept him company [in the Great Dining-Room] together with numerous dogs, tortoises and a hedgehog. It is said that some of these animals occupied the chapel" (8). Likewise, in *Daniel Deronda*, the chapel has been converted into a stable: "Each finely-arched chapel was turned into a stall" (409). Even if mere coincidence, Eliot's descriptions of The Abbey clearly resemble actual details of Newstead Abbey, which was quite popular with Victorian sightseers.

It can also be argued that Eliot provided *Deronda* with a tragic flaw that checked his vanity in much the same way that Byron's vanity was checked by his club foot. *Deronda*'s suspicion that he is a bastard is analogous to Byron's deformed limb in chapter 16. The possibility that he is illegitimate comes to *Deronda* as "a surprise that [...] strengthened the silent consciousness [of] a grief within," which "might be compared in some ways with Byron's susceptibility about his deformed foot" (174). On the following page, Eliot says that this gave *Deronda* "the sense of an entailed disadvantage." It was *Deronda*'s "deformed foot doubtfully hidden by the shoe" (175). Although *Deronda* is not actually illegitimate, the damage from such a suspicion has already been accomplished by the time he goes off to school.

Moreover, Eliot herself suffered from susceptibility analogous to Byron's foot. Rosemarie Bodenheimer says that the "revival of public attention to the connection between Byron and half sister Augusta Leigh shocked and enrages Marian, who could not

bring herself to refer to it except as 'the Byron subject' or 'the Byron question'" (237). This may be because Eliot herself wrote several brother/sister sonnets, which might also have been interpreted by the public as admission of similar crimes of incest. On the subject, Eliot wrote that "the fashion of being 'titilated [sic] by the worst is like the uncovering of the dead Lord Byron's club foot'" (Bodenheimer 238).

The question is why is Byron in *Daniel Deronda*? How does Eliot use him and how does he connect to the Jewish plight to find a homeland as it is discussed in the novel? Few critics have entertained this question because they miss the significance of Byron's presence or ignore that Byronic heroes find particular shape in Eliot's characters, especially Deronda at the opening of the novel. The Byronic hero is commonly understood as an egotist whose primary characteristic is his refusal to recognize any sense of authority that claims to be superior to the self. According to M.K. Newton, he is a rebel who thinks "he can create his own values by an act of will quite independently of all generally accepted moral sanctions" (28). To Byron, of course, these characters are heroes, but Eliot is openly critical of her Byronic egotists, attacking such egotism "when it becomes allied with narrow self-interest" (Newton 36). For Eliot, the self must first discover feeling, which could then act as "the foundation for a larger social and moral vision" (Newton 38). What distinguishes Deronda from Byronic egotists is that he is able to sublimate his egotistic energies and eventually accept the limits placed on the ego.

Deronda attempts to overcome his alienation and manages to find a sense of identity compatible with societal roles. He becomes "an advanced Romantic who has rejected metaphysical beliefs" and yet still discovers "a sense of identity which overcomes the most severe alienation and leads to positive social commitment and action" (Newton 189). Deronda suffers from intense self-consciousness and psychological alienation due to his belief that he is illegitimate and that he does not fully belong. His extreme self-consciousness makes it seem "that his feelings and sympathies do not centre on any self at all" (Newton 189). He is so alienated that he loses himself.

Eliot, however, also shows the process by which Deronda overcomes these difficulties and commits himself to a responsible course of action beneficial to society. Although at first this seems highly opposed to Byron's myth, it *is* actually borrowed from him. Newton reminds us, "it is a significant feature of Byron that he refuses to give up

his skepticism and defiance and accept any positive belief" (32). Byron's skepticism features prominently in Deronda's character when he is skeptical about Mordecai's prophetic ideas, and yet drawn by his "enthusiasm and emotional power to renew his inner self" (Newton 193). Deronda is able to form a lasting emotional attachment without professing a belief in metaphysical ideals. He does not obtain a belief in Judaism but "a perspective to which he can devote his energies [...] and around which he can build a firm sense of his own self" (193-94), "a sense of tribal identity" (198), without accepting the beliefs of Judaism. Instead, accepting the new identity of being Jewish allows Deronda to "overcome the alienation caused by his extreme self-consciousness" (Newton 199). Deronda has discovered ideals he can support, and committing to them provides him with "an authentic form of self-realization [...] without adopting a metaphysical position or rejecting advanced Romantic thinking. He remains an advanced Romantic yet succeeds in reconciling this with a [...] commitment to direct moral and social action (Newton 199). In other words, Deronda loses his negative Byronic attributes because he has retained his sense of Byronic skepticism. This adaptation is incredibly significant because it illustrates a type of spiritual revival that was possible not only for the Jews, but also for the English.

Before a detailed discussion on how England can learn from Deronda's ability to transform himself through his absorption of a new national identity, it is first necessary to detail his transformation from an Englishman to a figure of messianic Jewishness. When the novel begins, as Kathryn Hughes points out, Deronda is restless and "unable to settle on any profession or course of action." This is because "a man who does not know where he comes from is unable to lead a morally integrated life. It is only once Deronda discovers the truth about his birth that he can commit himself to love and to work" (Hughes 321).

Sir Hugo confesses he wants Deronda to take a career in politics. Just as Byron before him, Deronda is a minor member of the aristocracy, and his choice of career can be either prophetic or pragmatic. Byron experienced at best moderate success after taking his seat in the House of Lords. His pragmatic career was limited; however, after joining with the Greek cause, Byron at least appeared more successful. Of Deronda's choice, Eliot writes, "[Sir Hugo] should be highly gratified if Deronda were pulling by

his side for the cause of progress” (157). Sir Hugo tells Deronda in chapter 33, “the business of the country must be done” and that it could never be accomplished “if everybody looked at politics as if they were prophecy, and demanded an inspired profession. If you are to get into Parliament, it wouldn’t do to sit still and wait for a call either from heaven or constituents.” Sir Hugo insists that prophets are not “equipped to carry on the business of the country” (383-84) but more down-to-earth men like himself. And yet, according to Alan L. Mintz, for Deronda, “it is precisely [the] prophetic conception of vocation [he] considers the less ridiculous” (158).

Part of the reason Deronda needs to feel “called” to his vocation is one of the reasons we like him. Readers find Deronda sincere and respect that he wants to devote his life to an earnest cause. As Mintz indicates, Deronda commonly exhibits “ready sympathy and generosity of mind” (160). However, these qualities ultimately become an obstacle to achieving self-realization. Mintz explains further: “he has the opposite problem of most Victorian heroes, whose [...] world bereft of meaning can be allayed by no amount of feverish activity. For Deronda the world is a plenum whose very fullness threatens the capacity to take meaningful action” (Mintz 160). In other words, it is Deronda’s commendable sensitivity that diffuses rather than concentrates his energies. It can hardly be surprising to suggest that Deronda suffers from an affliction Byron also suffered from. This is especially evident in Byron’s “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year,” written in Missolonghi where his energies for the first time were no longer diffused but concentrated in the effort to free Greece from the Turks, an involvement which eventually helped restore his soiled reputation. In the poem Byron deliberately pushes away his more sensitive feelings in an effort to collect his passion for a nobler cause than mere mortal love. He has been “called” to free the Greeks. Byron writes:

Awake my spirit! Think through *whom*

Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,

And then strike home!

[...]

Seek out—less often sought than found—

A soldier’s grave, for thee the best;

Then look around, and choose thy ground,
 And take thy rest. (110)

Deronda is looking for a similar call to “compress his wandering energies” (Mintz 161), and when the call comes, it takes the form of “a disclosure of origins—Deronda discovers that by birth he is a Jew.” It is Deronda’s new identity that “affords a stage of action on the largest possible scale [...] nothing less than a messianic mission on behalf of an entire people” (Mintz 162).

However, before Deronda can undertake his messianic vocation, he must first separate himself from his “Englishness.” As Neil McCaw has observed, England itself provides the means by which Deronda comes to reject it. This process of rejection begins in Deronda’s childhood. Deronda is only partially a product of the English aristocracy, only a fringe member of the upper class. He is only a version of the English gentleman, as was Byron too, being half Scottish. But, Deronda has availed himself of Sir Hugo’s patronage and “without this patronage the ultimate Zionist quest could and would not even have been considered” (McCaw 127). His education provides him with “enhanced powers of discrimination” (McCaw 127). These powers encourage Deronda to leave England behind him because she can not provide him with either social standing or politico-spiritual awareness, both because he believes he is illegitimate and then because he is Jewish. In effect then, “England has [supplied] the means, intellectual, psychological and even material, by which it could itself be rejected” (McCaw 127). Instead of becoming an important *English* figure, the novel sees Deronda give up his English life “to live in accordance with his Jewish heritage and to take up the mantle left by Mordecai” (McCaw 130). It is through his new national identity that Deronda can gain social standing and politico-spiritual awareness. It is only then that Deronda is able to act as “the catalyst” to the founding of “a Jewish Palestine.” This allows Deronda personal growth and development while simultaneously providing for a Jewish “communal progress towards a defined destiny” (McCaw 128). The novel ends with Deronda leaving England for Jerusalem.

In 1816, Byron similarly rejected England by choosing to go into exile rather than remaining to witness his own ruin. The first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* were written before Byron actually went into exile. Thus, they contain the details of

Harold's departure from England rather than his own. And yet in Canto I, Byron foreshadows his own hasty departure, which was to come a few years later under a cloud of disgrace. Although Byron's "Fare Thee Well!" depicts his actual moment of exile, it is predominately reactionary. "Adieu, Adieu, My Native Shore" as it is included in *Childe Harold* best captures Byron's nobler aims in leaving England and more fully resonates with Deronda's similar departure. Byron writes:

With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go
 [...]

Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,
 So not again to mine.
 Welcome, welcome, ye dark-blue waves!
 And when you fail my sight,
 Welcome, ye deserts and ye caves!
 My native Land—Good Night! (I.10.178)

Hao Li has fully developed an explanation of how Deronda's calling, an event that rejects England, actually calls for a reformation of English national identity. It is through the Jewish story that Eliot "puts English national consciousness in perspective" (Li 151). Primarily the novel's thematic concern is "about reforming English national character" by accentuating "the need for such a reform" (LI 177) by exploring Jewish nationalism. Eliot's novel reveals that it is possible to embrace Jewish national identity because the Jews have a cohesive identity based on shared memories of oppression. For example, Mirah in chapter 20 says "it comforted me to know that my suffering was part of the affliction of my people, my part in the long song of mourning that has been going on through ages and ages" (Eliot 215). It is this notion of shared memories of pain that Byron captures so eloquently in the *Hebrew Melodies*. The last stanza of "The Wild Gazelle" fully expresses the Jewish anguish at being expelled from Jerusalem.

But we must wander witheringly,
 In other lands to die;
 And where our father's ashes be,
 Our own may never lie:
 Our temple hath not left a stone,

And Mockery sits on Salem's throne. (77)

For Jews, bereft of a physical homeland, "nation" is at the heart of their quest. The Jews experience intense emotional suffering at the loss of their physical homeland; the nation they call home. And yet, they still retain their national identity because they have a tribal and racial unity. In addition, the Jews remain cohesive because they also base their identity on shared memories. They carry their identity with them wherever they go because their memories provide them with their sense of national identity, even without a nation.

The English already have a geo-political nation, a physical home. Their national identity is based in part on the fact that they come from England. However, what seems to be at stake for them is a deeper sense of identity, a kind of belonging that Deronda finds when he embraces his Jewishness. What is lacking in the case of the English is "an emotional and spiritual authority comparable to Jewish national feeling" (Li 177). As Li says, such shared memory "may not be so straight forward for the English." The most striking feature of the English community then is its "lack of centripetal force in their emotion." In other words, there is a problem in the English national identity. As a result, Li finds that Eliot gropes "tentatively for specific qualities that she believes to be subsisting somewhere in the national tradition, which may be seen to promise an internal reform" (185). These qualities are often invoked in the novel by the Jewish characters, but this does not mean that they are necessarily "Jewish" qualities. In essence, they are intense feelings of nationality brought forth from shared memories.

Eliot calls forth the figure of Byron in order to do just this, remind the English of their own national identity and memory. Byron offers a connection to former Englishness, representing a shared English experience, a cultural memory. In summoning Byron, of course, Eliot is engaging in revisionist literary history. While Byron was arguably the most popular poet of his day, his self-imposed exile from England was necessary. Byron had to either leave the country or remain to witness his ruin due to rumors about his personal life. Although Byron later seemed to redeem his former sins in joining the fight for Greek liberation from the Turks, his reputation was still largely unsettled in 1876 when *Daniel Deronda* was written. According to Clement Tyson Goode, Jr., the 1870s began with an explosion of Byronism due to Harriet Beecher

Stowe's *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870). Stowe renewed an interest in Byron, ironically by setting out to destroy his reputation once and for all, but she only stirred Victorians into offering defenses of him (Goode 30-32). It seems that in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot actively takes part in this debate.

This investigation of *Daniel Deronda* has endeavored to offer an explanation for Byron's presence in the novel. Deronda's vocation to becoming a messiah for the Jews and Byron are connected in an effort to re-awaken English national identity. I believe that it is by calling up the shadow of Byron that Eliot attempts to remind her English audience of their own national past, their own shared memories. It is by exploring these past memories and their intense feelings that Eliot hopes to revive English national identity, in much the same way Deronda connects to his new national identity as a Jew.

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