Decomposing Figures

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The Decomposition of the Elephants

Double-Reading Daniel Deronda

In the seventh and penultimate volume of George Eliot’s final, elephantine novel, the narration is interrupted by a long letter that the titular hero receives from a subordinate character: “My dear Deronda,” writes Hans Meyrick,

In return for your sketch of Italian movements and your view of the world’s affairs generally, I may say that here at home the most judicious opinion going as to the effects of present causes is that “time will show.” As to the present causes of past effects, it is now seen that the late swindling telegrams account for the last year’s cattle plague—which is a refutation of philosophy falsely so called, and justifies the compensation to the farmers.¹

With this resounding fatuity, Meyrick’s letter opens no less than an interpretation of the novel, for it calls attention to the issue of causality, the problem that comes to light in the anomalous plotting of Deronda’s story. Meyrick’s flippant sentences describe the figural logic covertly at work in the text. Focusing attention on the narrative process, these lines suggest that the novel presents itself to be read in two conflicting ways: not only as a history of the effects of causes but also as a story of “the present causes of past effects.” Daniel Deronda calls for a double reading, and a close reading of Meyrick’s letter offers a starting point for this procedure.² It sets the reader on the traces of the rhetorical principles by which the text is constructed, principles at odds with the meanings indicated by Deronda’s narrator and dissimulated by the novel’s narrative mode. In short, the letter functions as a deconstruction of the novel.

Meyrick’s “bird-dance” (as Deronda calls it) in no way furthers the novel’s plot, unlike other letters included in the text, each of which
marks a turning point in the story. In this it invites comparison with the passages of commentary incorporated by the narrator, despite the contrast between Meyrick's frivolous, self-parodic tone and the narrator's more sober style. The contrast in tone is not merely superficial. Meyrick's letter proposes an interpretation of the novel that is substantially and radically at odds with the explanations of its narrator. Aberrant as interpretation and superfluous to the plot, the letter raises a question as to its ostensible function in the novel. That is, what significance does it have for the narrator, that privileged character linked in profound complicity with the hero of the novel? The narrator's view emerges clearly in the passage that follows the inserted letter and describes Deronda's reactions. Deronda takes Meyrick's parodic mode to indicate a basic incapacity for authentic feeling, a failure to deserve to be taken seriously as a lover. "Hans Meyrick's nature was not one in which love could strike the deep roots that turn disappointment into sorrow: it was too restless, too readily excitable by novelty, too ready to turn itself into imaginative material, and wear its grief as a fantastic costume" (chap. 52, pp. 709-10). This negative judgment reflects the fundamental strategy of the narrator and indicates one of the main ostensible meanings of the novel: seriousness and idealism triumph over parody and the ironic spirit. Meyrick's letter functions to exemplify the spirit and the style that the hero transcends.

The triumph of idealism over irony is written into the very structure of the novel's double plot, which presents us with Deronda and Gwendolen as rival protagonists. The distinction that the style of the letter helps to establish between Meyrick and Deronda is in one sense a subtler version of the opposition between Gwendolen and Deronda. From the reader's point of view, one of the erring heroine's more admirable and interesting qualities is her satirical spirit, her critical eye. This is also the admirable and interesting quality of the "English part" of Daniel Deronda, which the scheme of the narrative subordinates to the more idealistic and moralistic "Jewish part." The narrator's parable presents not merely Deronda's triumph and Gwendolen's defeat but the triumph of one mode of narration over another. Superior value is ascribed to the seriousness that distinguishes both Deronda as a character and the narrative mode employed to relate his activities, which contrasts with the more satiric mode of the Gwendolen plot and with the ironic mode of Meyrick's letter. Meyrick's letter may be readily understood as a negative example in a broad aesthetic and moral judgment inscribed in the story as the intention of its narrator.

The narrator's strategy is to offer in Meyrick's letter a more or less
satirical view of the characters’ situation and then to arrange the con­
text in a way that deprives this view of any validity.\footnote{This is achieved
in part by Deronda’s reflections on Meyrick’s superficiality but also by
the plot itself, for when Deronda receives the letter, he has just learned
of his Jewish birth, which gives him a basis for intimacy with Mirah
that Meyrick the Gentile cannot hope to share; in this light, Meyrick’s
hope of winning Mirah, the main theme of the letter, appears ridicu­
lously unfounded, “the unusually persistent bird-dance of an extrava­
gant fancy,” as the narrator allows Deronda to observe. The tactic is
to bracket the letter’s ironic mode with a dramatic irony at the level
of the action.

The presentation of Meyrick’s letter is thus a focus for the deval­
uation of ironic discourse. Viewing it in these terms, even before ex­
amining the text more closely to see just what is said that must be so energetically discredited, one can anticipate a good deal of what is at
stake. It is not merely coincidence that Deronda’s interpretation of
Meyrick closely resembles the description of the Romantic ironist in
Kierkegaard’s \textit{The Concept of Irony}, a polemical Hegelian account of
the ironic “moment.” Irony, for Kierkegaard, is properly seen as a
crucial but transitory moment in both classical and Christian history.
In insisting on subordinating irony to the value systems inherent in the
idea of history and the conventions of discourse, Kierkegaard is recog­
nizing the threat to history and to discourse itself that an absolute
irony must pose. Meyrick’s whimsical missive to Deronda, while it can
hardly be said to muster an absolute irony, employs an ironic mode of
a sort that subverts rather than serves the establishment of meaning
and value. As we shall see, it offers a deconstruction of the narrator’s
story and, by implication, of story in general—both of history, with its
system of assumptions about teleological and representational struc­
tures, and of discourse, with its intrinsic need to constitute meaning
through sequence and reference.

\textit{Daniel Deronda}, of course, is not merely a fictional “history”; it is
patently about history. It focuses on the causes at work in the personal
destinies of Deronda and Gwendolen and, finally, on the “cause” taken
up by Deronda as his destined mission. The novel claims for its hero
the possibility of a genuine historical role. The narrator seeks to por­
tray a subtle heroism, consisting in imaginative empathy with a his­
torical destiny, the achievement of a distinctively historical imagina­
tion. In the context of this invocation of historical consciousness,
Meyrick’s flippant allusions to Judaic tradition are strikingly discordant.
His letter shows a comparable flippancy about certain elementary con­
ventions of writing, such as consistency and continuity. These he
violates by his digressive style, continually interrupted by fanciful comments on his epistolary manner. The whole of Meyrick's letter is a tissue of allusions, a complex parroting of the diction, themes, and rhetorical strategies of various conventional texts. Far more than simply posing the dilemma of irony and history, these allusions render a strikingly exact account of discursive structures.

The opening paragraph of Meyrick's letter ostensibly has no real subject matter. It presents itself as badinage. Its covert topic, however, is the plotting of Daniel Deronda. "Here at home," we read, "the most judicious opinion going as to the effects of present causes is that 'time will show.'" This purports to be a satire of the conventional wisdom. In the process it satirizes, too, the traditional temporality that the realistic novel is supposed to imitate. (It should perhaps be stressed that this reading of the letter is not concerned merely with the meanings that the character Hans Meyrick might conceivably have intended, any more than this reading of the novel is concerned merely with the meanings that could plausibly be ascribed to the intentions of the narrator. The text generates a much wider range of significations.)

Narrative operates, indeed, by flattering our "judicious opinion": to read a sequence of events as a narrative is to expect that sequence to become intelligible. By the almost irresistible pressure of this expectation, the temporal sequence is conflated with a causal sequence; post hoc is interpreted as propter hoc. A novel evokes the passage of time, which is itself presented to show the "effects" of "causes" and thereby to reveal the events' significance. The formulation in Meyrick's letter satirizes this assumption as a kind of mental sloth, a withholding of judgment that is an evasion of interpretive effort. It would not be irrelevant to refer this criticism to Deronda's attitude toward learning his parentage, which he postpones indefinitely until he receives his mother's summons. What the narrator would wish us to interpret as a "wise passiveness," the text of the letter ironizes as the banal creed of "time will show." The remainder of the passage suggests that the passive trustfulness of protagonist and reader—their trust in the revelatory power of sheer sequence—is fundamentally misplaced.

In opening an ironic perspective on the overt time scheme of the conventional novel, Meyrick satirizes the norm that Eliot's novel was criticized for violating. Some readers of Daniel Deronda have judged that it fails adequately to render the sense of duration and the flow of time that would make the action of the novel plausible and significant. Henry James's Pulcheria echoes this opinion when she characterizes the "current" of the story as being, rather, "a series of lakes."
“time will show” passage identifies such objections as symptoms of a banal conception of novelistic time. The most radical critique in the passage, however, aims neither at the censure of the narrator’s strategy nor at the ostensible strategy itself. Rather, the passage exposes Deronda’s peculiar plot as a systematic disruption of narrative principles and temporal structures. In its second sentence Meyrick’s letter suggests that the novel discloses not “the effects of . . . causes” but “the present causes of past effects.”

The phrase describes exactly the decisive episode that has just taken place before Deronda’s receipt of Meyrick’s letter: the revelation of his Jewish birth. In this sense, Meyrick’s letter is no mere digression from the crucial action that occupies the preceding and following chapters (51 and 53), the confrontation between the hero and his mother. Rather, it names the distortion of causality that the reader senses in this turn of the plot. What a reader feels, on the basis of the narrative presentation, is that it is because Deronda has developed a strong affinity for Judaism that he turns out to be of Jewish parentage. Generations of readers have registered discomfort at the disclosure of the Princess Halm-Eberstein, and generations of critics have objected to it as an awkward implausibility or a graceless admixture of romance elements. Meyrick’s letter, however, names what is vitally at issue: not a violation of genre conventions or of vraisemblance but a deconstruction of the concept of cause.

Deronda’s decisive encounter in the preceding chapter involves a revelation of origin. Origin, cause, and identity are linked in the plot structure to which the letter alludes. The question of Deronda’s identity, posed and left suspended, receives an ostensibly definitive answer with the disclosure of his origins. Up to this point, Deronda has been identified by his qualities or attributes, in terms, that is, of his character. With the revelation of his parentage, this identity conferred by character is seconded by an identity conferred by origin, and the latter is presented, implicitly, as the cause of the former—as the cause of Deronda’s character. This presentation conforms with the conventional logic of cause and effect and exploits the myth of origin, the view of origin as having a unique generative power.

This causative force is also strongly emphasized in the Princess Halm-Eberstein’s account of Deronda’s family history. The power of genetic heritage proves itself all the more impressively in resurfacing in the third generation after a deliberate suppression in the second. Deronda’s mother tells him: “I have been forced to obey my dead father. I have been forced to tell you that you are a Jew, and deliver to you what he commanded me to deliver” (p. 693). “I have after all been the
instrument my father wanted. . . . His yoke has been on me, whether I loved it or not. You are the grandson he wanted" (p. 726). Deronda accedes to this interpretation of the workings of origin, and the narrator in no way discredits the genealogical myth that marks these passages. Full weight is put on the metaphor of birth as destiny. Chapters 51 and 53 emphatically affirm the identification between origin and cause.

The sequence of events in the plot as a whole, however, presents Deronda's revealed origins in a different perspective. The account of Deronda's situation has made it increasingly obvious to the reader that the progression of the hero's destiny—or, that is to say, the progression of the story—positively requires a revelation that he is of Jewish birth. For Deronda's *Bildungsroman* to proceed, his character must crystallize, and this must come about through a recognition of his destiny, which has remained obscure to him, according to the narrator's account, largely because of his ignorance of his origins. The suspenseful stress on Deronda's relationship with Mordecai and with Mirah orients his history in their direction, and Mordecai explicitly stresses his faith that Deronda is a Jew. Thus, the reader comes upon Deronda's Jewish parentage as an inevitable inference to be drawn not simply from the presentation of Deronda's qualities and his empathy with the Jews but above all from the patent strategy and direction of the narrative. The revelation of Deronda's origins therefore appears as an effect of narrative requirements. The supposed cause of his character and vocation (according to the chapters recounting the disclosure), Deronda's origin presents itself (in the light of the rest of the text) rather as the effect of the account of his vocation: his origin is the effect of its effects.

The decisive episode of the "Deronda plot" thus presents itself to be read in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, the narrator's account emphatically affirms its causal character. On the other hand, the plot and the overall strategy of the novel conspicuously call attention to its status as the effect of tactical requirements. The contradiction cannot be reduced to the simple distinction between the event of Deronda's birth, a genuine origin that took place in the past, and the disclosure of his birth, a retrospective account that takes place in the present. It is not the event of Deronda's birth as a Jew that is decisive for his story, but the knowledge or affirmation of it. This disclosure, as far as the plot is concerned, is the event with causative powers; yet it appears, too, as a mere effect of the account of Deronda's emerging vocation. Meyrick's inverted phrase names the contradiction that characterizes this narrative structure. It is a chiasmus or a metalepsis, a reversal of the temporal status of effect and cause: cause is relocated
in the present and effect in the past. In naming Deronda’s revealed Jewish parentage as the “present cause” of his demonstrated vocation for Jewishness, its “past effects,” Meyrick’s letter is naming the cause as an effect of its effects, and the effects as the cause of their cause, and is therein identifying the contradictory relationship between the claims of the realistic fiction and the narrative strategy actually employed.

Meyrick’s metalepsis also describes the operation establishing Deronda’s identity as a Jew. The account in the chapters on Deronda’s meeting with his mother grounds itself on the principle that identity in the sense of origin precedes and causes identity in the sense of character and attributes. The account implicit in the narrative structure, however, presents character and attributes as preceding and causing the inference of origin. This goes far toward undermining the authority of the notion of identity, as well as of origin and of cause, for attributes carry the authority of identity only insofar as they belong to a system involving causality, in which behavior is causally related to identity. Meyrick’s deconstructed causality, in which “present causes” match “past effects,” describes, as we have seen, the sequence establishing the origin and identity of the hero of the novel. Since Deronda is the character whose consciousness coincides most closely with that of the narrator, and who thus represents the exemplary subject, the deconstruction of his identity has radical implications for the concept of the subject in general. The origin of the subject appears as the effect of a narrative requirement, the requirement that an ostensible cause with the authority and mystique of an origin be retrospectively posited to confirm and account for the established direction of the action. Like the concepts of cause and of identity, then, the concept of the subject is the product of a metalepsis, a rhetorical operation, an aberrant reversal or substitution of rhetorical properties.

Meyrick’s letter explicitly associates the issue of Jewish identity with the identity principle of formal logic, parodically formulated as substitution of properties. He has been talking with Mordecai, Meyrick writes, “and agreeing with him in the general principle, that whatever is best is for that reason Jewish. I never held it my forte to be a severe reasoner, but I can see that if whatever is best is A and B happens to be best, B must be A, however little you might have expected it beforehand.” One recognizes here the premises and procedure of the novel: if whatever is best is Jewish and Deronda happens to be best, Deronda must be Jewish, however unexpected or scandalous this may appear for the hero of a Victorian novel. The subversiveness of Meyrick’s
formulation lies partly in its linking of the blank, unresonant, significance-free language of logical principles with the resonant, specific, value- and affect-charged topic of a hero and his possible identity as a Jew. The connection suggests on the one hand the constructed, artificial, non-"organic" status of the hero’s story and on the other hand the preposterous character of the purportedly value-free principle. It is invoked here, of course, in reference to a property that reduces the statement to nonsense—namely, the enigmatic property of Jewishness, which properly speaking cannot exist as the logical consequence of a deductive process.

The deconstructive force of the passage has to do with its reduction of the question of human identity to the application of a logical principle: if \( b = A \) and \( B = b \), then \( B = A \) (since \( A \) cannot at the same time equal \( b \) and not equal \( B \), which equals \( b \)). The metaphysical issue of the identity of the subject and the humanistic issue of the identity of a person are reconstrued as a strictly logical, rhetorical issue, a question of the function of linguistic terms. A defining feature of fiction, especially of the realistic novel, is the presentation of all issues in terms of relationships among fictional characters, or fictive persons—in terms, that is, of a phenomenology of subjectivity. The choice of this context is in itself a defense of the subject as the locus of meaning and value, against an alternative account treating these as the valueless products of the operations of language itself. As discussion of the narrative structure of Daniel Deronda has suggested, the latter account of meaning is also inscribed in the novel (covered over by the version of the fictive subject functioning as narrator). Meyrick’s formulation contributes to this account by reversing the recuperative, defensive, constructive process involved in establishing a phenomenological context. In renaming the novel’s central issue as a matter of a substitution of terms, Meyrick’s deconstructive gesture reconceives the significant action of human subjects as the purposeless play of signifiers.

Meyrick’s letter marks what classical rhetoric called a parabasis, a shifting of attention from the level of operation of the narrator (the reconstruction of the sequence of events in an imaginary human life) to the level of operation of the text or narrative as such (the construction of a discourse and a history). The letter’s phrasing plays on obscuring the distinction between the two levels of operation: “As to the present causes of past effects,” writes Meyrick, “it is now seen that the late swindling telegrams account for the last year’s cattle plague.” The sentence exploits the ambiguity of account for, which seems to mean both “to render an account of” and “to cause.” The telegrams are said not merely to explain or offer an account of the cattle plague but to produce it, to stand as the cause of which the
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plague is the effect. This proposes the notion that writing, in the present, causes a material event in the past (as the present requirements of writing Deronda's story seem the "swindle" that produces the physical event of his birth as a Jew). Meyrick's play on words calls attention to an assumption inherent in narrative: an action that can be accounted for, one about which a narrative can be recounted, has by the same token an adequate and comprehensible cause, because (so the reasoning implies) to account for something consists, above all, in identifying its cause. Meyrick's metalepsis or chiasmus carries this a step further to point out the sense in which the account of an action is its cause. Questioning the meaning of "accounting for" an event, the sentence is not only deconstructing the concept of causality but also putting in question the representational function of narrative. Narrative structure presents what are ostensibly fundamental properties of reality (or metaphysical categories) such as causality (or the origin of the subject, or identity) as the product of its own operations, the effect of a play of signs. Thus, far from representing the truth of the human situation, the subject's origin and destiny in a history, narrative represents with authority nothing more than its own structural operations.

Causality, the subject, identity, representation, and origin are deconstructed or put in question by the reading of the novel proposed in the first half of the second sentence of Meyrick's letter. The second half of the sentence comments on the inherent preposterousness of this situation. Referring to the reversal of cause and effect, the sentence continues: "which is a refutation of philosophy falsely so called, and justifies the compensation to the farmers." This satirizes the pretension to a victory over philosophy, or the claim that irony triumphs over discourse. At the moment that deconstruction claims to achieve a "refutation" of causality or of the subject or whatever, the argument deconstructs itself in turn, ironized through the very process of making its pretension explicit. This does not happen, one should stress, as a result of a general principle or a belief that radical skepticism must be skeptical of itself. What is involved is not a mental attitude (such as the determination to view all assertions ironically) but a tropological operation, a reversal of rhetorical properties, such as the metalepsis reversing the order of cause and effect and renaming "cause" the effect of an effect, and "effect" the cause of a cause. The deconstructive operation, while it consists in pointing out that the concept of causality amounts to an aberrant and arbitrary ordering of rhetorical elements, is itself no more than an equally aberrant reordering of these elements, the performance of another tropological operation. It is for
this specific reason that a deconstruction is not a refutation, or that a
deconstructive "refutation" can claim for itself no more authority
than the refuted concept. The text's ironization of the "refutation of
philosophy falsely so called" is referring to this specific state of affairs.

However, Meyrick's satirical sentence refers as well to a state of
affairs quite different from the dilemma of rhetoricity: he invokes
"swindling telegrams," "last year's cattle plague," and "the compensa-
tion to the farmers." These allusions satirize the deconstructive pre-
tension to neutrality, the pretension, precisely, to constitute merely a
tropological operation, free of motive and affect, just the way decon-
struction has been described above. It is indeed a tropological opera-
tion that is involved, but it does not have the privilege of taking place
in a neutral context empty of reference or value judgments. Rhetoric
inevitably presents itself not only as trope but also as persuasion, so
that deconstructive discourse inevitably lapses into a covert attempt at
"refutation," into a dogmatic or exhortative mode. Meyrick's sentence
suggests that the motive and goal of "the refutation of philosophy
falsely so called" is none other than a justification of the "compensa-
tion to the farmers," and this makes the point: the deconstructive pro-
ject takes place in a context of accusation and excuse, of blame and
defense, and cannot avoid the motive of self-justification.

Like the "refutation of philosophy," which involves a cattle plague
and compensation to the farmers, the deconstructive account of cause
and identity inscribed in Daniel Deronda involves a troublesome refer-
ent and a justificatory impulse. It involves, namely, the hero's Jewish-
ness. The narrative is relentlessly referential. In a sense the novel's
principal issue is the scandal of the referent. Consideration of this issue
can begin with an observation of how the specific kind of identity in
question disturbs the coherence of Deronda's story. Not only the dis-
closure of Deronda's parentage but the preceding part of the story as
well reveal themselves to be based on unwarranted shifts of rhetorical
categories.

The earliest episode indicating Deronda's vocation might be
thought to be his rescue of Mirah. The rescue of a maiden in distress,
specifically a Jewish maiden, allegorically prefigures Deronda's destiny
as a savior of the Jews. The question of Deronda's own Jewishness,
however, first becomes explicit in his meeting with Mordecai. Morde-
cai's identification of Deronda as a Jew and Deronda's acceptance of
their resultant relationship mark the first step in the establishment of
Deronda's Jewish identity. However, the account of this development
involves a radical contradiction, which is perhaps most conspicuous in
the scene where Deronda, rowing down the river to seek Mordecai,
emerges out of the sunset to encounter the waiting Mordecai on Blackfriars Bridge. The narrator stresses that Mordecai has foreseen precisely this scene, that his inner vision of the "prefigured friend" prefigured the external sight of Deronda floating into view against a glowing sky. Thus, on the one hand, Mordecai’s identification of Deronda is presented as a recognition, and for this reason his assertion of a claim on him has authority and appeal. On the other hand, Deronda’s assumption of the identity of Mordecai’s prefigured friend is shown to be a consequence of Mordecai’s act of claiming him. He becomes what Mordecai claims he is.

If one imitates the deconstructive gesture of Meyrick’s letter and reads the “Deronda plot” as a set of formulas about the identity principle, one recognizes that two different conceptions of the functioning of language are being exploited in the narrator’s account. First, the account claims that an identity is recognized, that Mordecai’s words on this occasion state the recognized fact. To recognize or know is

a transitive function that assumes the prior existence of an entity to be known, and that predicates the ability of knowing by way of properties. It does not itself predicate these attributes but receives them, so to speak, from the entity itself. . . . To the extent that it is verbal, it is properly denominative and constative. . . . Knowledge depends on this non-coercive possibility.10

In presenting Mordecai’s identification of Deronda as a recognition, the text makes use of this cognitive, or constative, concept of language. The possibility of Mordecai’s recognizing Deronda as his “prefigured friend” depends, however, on the possibility of an inner representation prefiguring an external sight. This second notion conflicts with the constative concept of language, as is made especially clear by the explicit description of Mordecai’s inner representation as a “coercive type”: “there are persons whose yearnings, conceptions—nay, travelled conclusions—continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power: the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type” (p. 527). The power, the coercive function, of Mordecai’s identification of Deronda is emphasized in subsequent passages describing Deronda’s acceptance of the identity assigned him. This aspect of the account makes use of a concept of identity as a principle actively posited rather than known or recognized, the product of an assertion rather than a matter of fact. Such a notion, that identity is the product of a coercive speech act, deconstructs the identity principle and the constative concept of
language grounded upon it. Thus, the narration of Deronda's relationship with Mordecai both stresses the authority of recognition or knowledge and undermines the basis of this authority. The contradiction here resembles the one involved in the disclosure of Deronda's birth, which both stresses the causative power of origin and draws attention to the questionable status of cause.

The account of Deronda's relationship with Mordecai includes more than their encounter at Blackfriars Bridge, for the narrator tries to lend to their relationship the plausibility and certainty of a gradual process, as well as the impact and authority of a decisive event. The part of the narrative describing Deronda's increasing responsiveness to Mordecai's idea also plays upon two conflicting notions of how language functions. The narrator describes Deronda's development of a Jewish identity in response to Mordecai's assertions but seeks to account for it not as a challenge to the concepts of cognition and constitution but rather as an authentic cognitive process. Mordecai and Deronda, it is suggested, are engaged in a kind of reading, a hermeneutic practice, in which the interpreter and the text (or Mordecai and Deronda) stand in a certain mutual relation. At the same time, however (as if in default of this hermeneutic model, which is hazy at best), the narrative is playing upon the notion of an act of naming, a speech act with the type of authority and validity characteristic of the performative mode. A performative utterance in and of itself accomplishes an action or brings about a situation, rather than describes or interprets it. In addressing Deronda as if he were a Jew, Mordecai is "doing something rather than merely saying something." Mordecai's speech, which so often resembles a litany, has a performative quality, and his influence on Deronda evokes the idea of a conversion. The ritual of conversion involves a speech act that changes the identity of the person who is the object of the ritual.

It is striking, however, that conversion precisely does not apply in regard to Jewish identity, which is inherited, historical, and finally, here, genetic. For the establishment of identity as a Jew, what is required is not merely a performative but an actual performance, an act or event, not just a speech act. Such an act is remotely invoked by the romance elements in the "Deronda plot," most notably the kind of magical metamorphosis found in fairy tales. In fairy tales a ritual word and gesture produce not merely conversion (a change of spiritual status or of an inner state) but physical transformation. This would be the effect required of Mordecai's influence, were his relationship with Deronda to establish fully Deronda's identity as a Jew. Such an effect exceeds the limits of realistic narrative. To be a Jew (and this is empha-
sized by the narrator, who never suggests that Deronda might simply "embrace" the Jewish "faith") is to have been born a Jew, not merely to take up the spiritual and cultural tradition of Judaism. Thus the establishment of Deronda's identity must shift from his relationship with Mordecai to the revelation of his mother. One discovers, then, that the presentation of Deronda's Jewishness requires several shifts of ground. From the notion of the cognitive and constative function of language the account must shift to the notion of its performative function. From this it must make a further shift of ground to the notion of an actual, nonlinguistic act or fact.

With this last shift to the act or the fact, the narrative goes aground. Insistence on the hero's specifically Jewish identity not only puts in question the authority of the discourse but effectively disrupts its coherence. The text's insistent reference leads relentlessly to the referent—to *la chose*, in fact: the hero's penis, which must have been circumcised, given what we are told of his history. In the period in which Deronda's story takes place, male babies were not routinely circumcised. Circumcision was a ritual procedure practiced by Jews, so that evidence of circumcision amounted to evidence of Jewish origin. For Deronda not to have known he was Jewish until his mother told him means, in these terms, "that he never looked down," an idea that exceeds, as much as does magical metamorphosis, the generous limits of realism. Deronda must have known, but he did not: otherwise, of course, there could be no story. The plot can function only if *la chose*, Deronda's circumcised penis, is disregarded; yet the novel's realism and referentiality function precisely to draw attention to it. Acknowledgment of the fact or act would prevent the construction of the narrative, as it also, in fact, prevents the completion of the deconstruction. It persists as a residue of the deconstructive process. The hero's circumcised phallus, proof of origin and identity, is more than an exemplary metonymy, though it is certainly that. It is distinctively significant, not as a rhetorical structure, but as a referent—one that produces embarrassment, a sense of discomfort that is not intellectual and that is more than a sense of aesthetic incongruity.

The mere emphasis on Jewishness, quite apart from any reference to circumcision, was enough to produce discomfort in many Victorian readers of *Daniel Deronda*. It led them to object to the construction of the plot, pointing out what constitutes, in fact, its metalectic structure. One must recall just how common such a plot structure was in nineteenth-century English novels, which frequently dealt with the establishment of the hero's identity and presented the decisive evidence in a dramatic disclosure late in the story, amply prepared by...
incontrovertible circumstantial evidence developed in the earlier part of the novel. Few readers saw fit to object to this construction in, say, *Oliver Twist*, though the establishment of Oliver's identity is marked by the same implausibility or artificiality as Deronda's. Oliver's inheritance of his father's name and property turns on the fulfillment of a condition in his will (on conformity, that is, to a written text) that includes the stipulation “that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice, or wrong.” That Oliver is his father's son is the effect, then, of his being, “in effect,” “his father's son,” which is to say good, or virtuous with the virtues of the middle class. This metalepsis is as patent here as in *Deronda*, but the impact is altogether different when the evidence reveals, not that the hero's parentage is “good,” but that it is Jewish. It is the specific referent in *Daniel Deronda* that generates its deconstructive effects, by calling attention to the metaleptic structure, which otherwise might not give rise to comment. The scandal of the referent calls attention to the scandal of metalepsis or, more generally, of rhetoricity. The glaring referent highlights the narrative structure as a strictly groundless construct. While it would be misleadingly reassuring to suggest that this is the real reason for readers' objection to the “Jewish part,” it would be equally mistaken to suppose that the objection has nothing to do with rhetoricity.

For many of Eliot's contemporary readers, being a Jew, like having sexual organs, was something to which as little attention as possible should be called. Both terms involved in the notion of a circumcised penis would produce embarrassment. For the men of Eliot's day, sexual identity and Jewish identity did have a kind of structural similarity. Each claimed, on the one hand, an irreducible physical element and, on the other, an enormous burden of cultural, spiritual, and historical significations. Each involved two extremes, unlike, for example, identity as a member of the middle class, the sort of identity more typically in question for a novel's hero (as for Oliver Twist). The physical element was necessary but not sufficient, while the cultural dimension was significant but, strictly speaking, not sufficient. The authority of the physical element as the basis of identity was undermined by the importance of the cultural element and vice versa.15

This mutually canceling effect comes into play in *Daniel Deronda* when the narrator stresses both the hero's vocational affinity for Jewishness and his Jewish genealogy. Deronda's demonstrated empathy with Judaic tradition makes the disclosure of his Jewish birth seem either superfluous or implausibly neat, while the asserted fact of his genetic heritage makes his intellectual and emotional affinity seem at
once superfluous and inadequate and casts doubt on its authenticity as free choice. The deconstructive effect of the Jewish referent is not merely to call attention to the groundlessness or rhetoricity of the narrative structure. It operates in a more precise and far-reaching way as well. Thus the referentiality of the identity at issue, Jewishness, suspends the principle of identity between two modes: the performative mode, which would define it as a form of activity, and the constative mode, which would define it as a matter of knowledge. Like the affirmation of the hero’s Jewishness, which must stop short of acknowledging his circumcision, affirmations of a performative and of a constative concept of identity must stop short of asserting the fact or the act. Full affirmation of the constative mode would mean portraying Deronda’s self-identification as real knowledge (as opposed to acceptance of another’s word, whether Mordecai’s or the Princess Halm-Eberstein’s). Full affirmation of the performative mode would mean portraying Deronda’s self-identification as a real action, such as the attempt to restore Jewish nationhood, which he is about to undertake at the novel’s close. Both possibilities are excluded from the narrator’s account. Both the origin of Deronda’s history (the fact of his birth) and its goal (the act of restoration) are excluded from his history proper. Deronda’s parentage is introduced not as the testimony of the narrator but as the account of the Princess Halm-Eberstein, and his birth is located in a past prior to the time of the novel. Similarly, Deronda’s activity in Palestine is introduced not as an actuality but as an eventuality subsequent to the novel’s time.

To put it another way, the text brackets the decisive assertion in a story within a story and banishes the decisive performance to a fictive future beyond the story’s end. This exclusion of knowledge and action from the realistic narrative proper signifies an acknowledgment of their constitutionally fictional status and with that an acknowledgment of the limited possibilities of language. It is implicitly acknowledged that “the possibility for language to perform is just as fictional as the possibility for language to assert.”

Thus, there emerges in Daniel Deronda an account of the determining connections between the referential function of language and its constative and performative functions. Its inexorable referentiality prohibits the narrative from claiming authority either as a genuine fact or as a genuine act, for the referent itself constitutes the fact and the act and remains extralinguistic, necessarily excluded from the discourse that inevitably refers to it. Circumcision stands as an emblem for the fact or act that is at once the proof that the text requires and the referent that it excludes. The “all-presupposing fact” has a peculiar
double status. It signifies a proposition that carries authority neither as knowledge nor as performance, alluded to in the epigraph to chapter 1 as the novel’s point of departure, which cannot be made fully explicit: “whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.” This formula also names the text’s fractionally presented referent the fact of the hero’s Jewish identity, affirmed in an account that omits to acknowledge its signifying mark.

The unacknowledged mark is the circumcised phallus emblematizing the powers of constatation, performance, and reference. It is the exemplary signifier, and it commemorates a fiat allowing the possibility of signification. It is a sign that stands for a story, told to account for the origin of Jewish identity: the story, namely, of Abraham and Isaac and of Jehovah’s intervention to prevent the completion of an act of auto-castration. An account that would link the possibility of signification with the possibility of origin and of identity must invoke a divine power. Deus ex machina cuts short the cutting off of the race: so the mark of circumcision signifies. Divine dispensation grants genealogy, history, and signifying power, as Jehovah intervenes before the actual obliteration: it suffices that the possibility of obliteration should be admitted and the process instituted or prepared. The story told here in terms of a divine fiat relates how it is that, while the conditions of truth or authentic meaning (such as causality) are disclosed to be without authority, that disclosure in truth never carries authority itself (since, as we have observed, the disclosure takes place as a rhetorical reversal like the reversals that constitute the conditions of truth). Divine fiat allows the destruction of discourse to stand as mere deconstruction, a “refutation” as fictitious as the truth of history or philosophy that it refutes. Circumcision marks this account of the institution of signification. As a mark that tells too much of the conditions of history or too much of the limits cutting off signification or storytelling, circumcision is a sign that the story must evade or exclude or cut out: narrative must cut out or cut around the cutting short of the cutting off of narrative. In this circumcisive outlining, Daniel Deronda affirms a history that elicits deconstruction.

A distinctive aspect of Daniel Deronda’s deconstructive mode is signaled by the peculiar status of its referent as the exemplary signifier that refers to the story of the institution of signification. “That all-presupposing fact from which our story sets out” is a reference to another story, a story conceived as an account of the conditions of storytelling. The chapter containing Hans Meyrick’s letter presents an excellent example of this operation. It opens with an epigraph
quoted from La Rochefoucauld, which offers a statement exactly coinciding with the narrator's (and Deronda's) evaluation of the difference between Mordecai's character and Deronda's. The quoted passage sounds the theme of love and irony, authenticity and inauthenticity, and represents the traditional moral and aesthetic judgment with which the narrator's account aligns itself, so that for the narrator the epigraph functions to lend the authority of a classical precedent to that judgment. The aphorism also, through its form, seeks an effect similar to that which the narrator seeks in presenting certain dubious elements of the Deronda plot (such as Mordecai's second sight): an effect of surprise resolving into conviction. Thus La Rochefoucauld's aphorism takes the form of two symmetrical pseudo-paradoxes: "La même fermeté qui sert à résister à l'amour sert aussi à le rendre violent et durable; et les personnes faibles qui sont toujours agitées des passions n'en sont presque jamais véritablement remplis."

The aphorism exemplifies a classical rhetorical mode that compels conviction by means of its symmetrical metaphorical assertions. The category of fermeté seems to account for both resistance to love and the durability of love. The category of faiblesse seems to account for both "agitation" and shallowness. A truth that reveals itself as a rhetorical structure, La Rochefoucauld's aphorism resembles the narrative structure of Daniel Deronda. The authority of a prior text is being invoked to ratify not only the message but also the rhetorical usage favored by the narrator. By the same token, however, the epigraph stands as a pretext for the deconstructive operation in Meyrick's letter, which indeed proposes a reading of the entire narrative as a deconstruction of La Rochefoucauld's aphorism: an extended critical commentary on its precepts, its rhetorical mode, and their attendant metaphysical claims. Thus, the text of Daniel Deronda presents as its point of departure a prior text, a rhetorical and syntactic structure, rather than the dilemmas of subjectivity. The starting point of the novel's discourse is not the subject, but written language. The signifying process performed by the text is one of allusion or citation in which the signifier points toward a referent constituted as another exemplary signifier. The citational mode testifies to the partial or fictive cutting off from meaning in the form of a further sign.

The text of Meyrick's letter offers explicit emblems for the citational mode of the novel, in addition to the implicit emblem of circumcision. The letter places the novel under the rival signs of Hesperus and Hyperion: "Meanwhile I am consoling myself for your absence by finding my advantage in it—shining like Hesperus when Hyperion has departed." If Hyperion is the god of an art envisaged as the light of
truth, Hesperus is the god of an art conceived as a process of forging or forgery. The citational (or deconstructive) text of Daniel Deronda is a consummate forgery passing as an authentic work, and the rival lovers, Deronda and Meyrick, along with the rival gods, Hyperion and Hesperus, personify the two kinds of reading elicited by the narrative: the reading carried out by the narrator and the deconstructive reading proposed by passages such as Meyrick’s letter.

However, it can be misleading to think of the two readings in personified or personifying terms, since they constitute a single discontinuous process that moves away from personification, abandoning the notion of the subject for the notion of linguistic operation, reconstruing the narrative’s starting point as a text rather than as a subject. More apposite than the rivalry of Hesperus and Hyperion is Meyrick’s allegory of the “mystery” and the “basis”:

I leave it to him to settle our basis, never yet having seen a basis which is not a world-supporting elephant, more or less powerful and expensive to keep. My means will not allow me to keep a private elephant. I go into mystery instead, as cheaper and more lasting—a sort of gas which is likely to be continually supplied by the decomposition of the elephants.

Instead of a symmetrical confrontation between opposites of the same status, such as Hesperus/Hyperion, one may think of Daniel Deronda’s aporia as an asymmetrical obstruction: composition/decomposition (taking the latter term in its material sense, which is not the opposite of composition), or a single word for the single process or text: (de)composition. I cut short the process here—as Meyrick writes, “without comment or digression.”

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