Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

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Across the Boundaries of Self
George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*

[The situation of the exile is essentially a situation of permanent crisis.]
—Nathan Rotenstreich, *Zionism: Past and Present*, 54

*If the main features of the form* of content in the carnivalesque mode are the horizontal erasure of boundaries and the vertical reversals of social stratification, narratives in which only one of these two topoi is manifest may be regarded as intermediate. One example is George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, which thematizes the blurring of identity boundaries.

The phenomenology of imagination that characterizes this novel corresponds to its halfway modal status. Its topography includes a variety of outdoor scenes, but in most of them—the circumscribed archery grounds (admission by ticket), the river, the Chase, the Park, the *Judengasse*—confinement within bounds dominates over openness. Conversely, most of the indoor areas are either vast (the parlors and dining halls of the great houses) or liminal (the house in Gadsmere and the Meyrics’ house in Chelsea opening up, respectively, on the garden and the river). The most meaningful engagements between the characters, their self-protective armor giving way or being reasserted and repaired, are played out against such a spatially ambivalent background.

The form of expression likewise straddles the line between the carnivalesque and the “biographical” modes. The narrative begins *in medias res*: the opening scene around the gambling tables in Leubronn follows Grand-...
court’s initial courtship of Gwendolen and Deronda’s rescue of Mirah in the plot but is presented before these events. Yet this scene does not represent the inevitable outcome of a growing tendency; it is presented as a chance collision that creates new instabilities.¹ On the other hand, an element of thematic determinism is also at work: the paths of Deronda and Gwendolen converge in the same tourist resort as a result of the swelling of tendencies on each side: both these characters have translated the sense of displacement from the center of their being into a geographical distance from home, and both are uneasily deferring conjugal commitments. The opening of the novel is thus a hybrid form in which the convention of a chance encounter combines with the carnivalesque pattern of tendencies swelling to a point of crisis. The eye contact between the two protagonists opens up their identities to each other, creating a narrow but deep channel of communication from which others will remain excluded.

Carnivalesque events are not a prominent part of the substance of the novel’s content. Only two such events are referred to, and only very briefly. One of them is mentioned in a discussion of political expediency: the Archbishop of Naples is said to have sanctioned, in what would now be called a populist gesture, the St. Januarius procession against the plague (1993: 384). The other is embedded in a simile: the attitude of British mainstream society to Jews is compared with the attitude of the matrons of Delphi to the tired Maenads who had wandered into their city: the matrons “tenderly” minister to the Bacchae and take them “safely to their own borders” (195).² Both the events thus serve local rhetorical purposes. Both also serve as instances of the motif of horizontal osmosis: in such pageants without footlights the spectators touch the participants, and the borderlines of states, bodies, minds, groups, or classes are temporarily transgressed (see Bakhtin 1968: 7; 1984: 108–47). In contrast to the novels of Dostoevsky, George Eliot’s contemporary, Daniel Deronda seldom gives this topos a melodramatic heightening, yet it explores a spectrum of its thematic permutations.

In particular, it is largely through the representation of blurring boundaries—between the participants and the spectators, the individual and his or her immediate physical or psychological environment, the self and the other, the self and a larger whole—that the novel negotiates an ethical compromise between supererogation at one extreme and nihilism at the other. The

². Susan Meyer (1993) discusses this simile as associated with the British proto-Zionism that promoted the Jews’ seeking of their homeland with the idea of seeing them safely away from their own midst; I see it also as a part of the novel’s analysis of the boundaries of sympathy.
ideological stance thus evolved is one that has moved, somewhat hesitantly, from an Austen-like middle-way model in the direction of the Dickensian model of checks and balances. The images and motifs pertaining to the blurring of boundaries are, in *Daniel Deronda*, associated with the dialectics of self-loss and self-transcendence: the extreme of self-transcendence may amount to self-loss but an insufficiency of self-transcendence can be equally self-destructive. This deployment of possibilities is carried out via the twin themes of vocation and sympathy.3

George Eliot is one of the first major nineteenth-century novelists of vocation. As Alan Mintz has shown (1976, 1978), the birth of the romance of vocation (as opposed to the romance of love) is associated with the ideological changes and the work ethics of the Victorian period. Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the nineteenth-century spread of scientific ideas, a person’s self-definition would rest on religious identity and affiliations in terms of family, community, geographical region, and nationality, whereas profession was regarded mainly as a way of making a living and thus securing one’s place in the above frameworks. With the weakening of religious beliefs and the intensification of economic pressures on the upper classes, profession, idealized as “vocation,” stepped in to fill the void, redefining the options of self-realization available to the individual.4 In *Daniel Deronda*, indeed, the concern with vocation reconciles the pursuit of social, national, or communal progress with the agenda of self-perfection: the Commissar and the Yogi, the change from without and the change from within, enter into a somewhat uneasy alliance.

The proto-Zionist plot of *Daniel Deronda* emphasizes the change from without, the need for a radical restructuring of the life of the Jewish nation. The novel’s prophet of this change, Ezra Mordecai Cohen, is, however, represented as a version of the Yogi, a mystic whose spirit transcends and, as it were, consumes his fragile body, and who therefore stands in need of the “executive self” in the shape of the healthy, handsome, puritanical Daniel Deronda. The reader is partly prepared for Daniel’s ultimate endorsement of Mordecai’s vision by the narrator’s explanations of his inability to commit himself to British politics, the field that in her previous novel, *Middlemarch*,

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3. See Rimmon-Kenan 1985 on theme as the meaning of a recurrence of narrative details.
4. In the twentieth century the romance of vocation, persisting mainly in the field of popular fiction and film, developed into a more somber subgenre, the romance of career (e.g., Klaus Mann’s *Mephisto*).
George Eliot presented as a sufficiently grateful sphere for the application of idealistic individual energies. The reference to the St. Januarius procession is made in the context of Daniel’s reluctance to opt for party politics, his fear of a conflict between loyalty to the narrower and the broader frameworks—much like the quandary of the Archbishop of Naples who must have made a compromise with his conscience by allowing a carnivalesque event to raise the spirits of the population during an epidemic. The most significant of obstacles preventing the wholehearted dedication of Daniel’s energies to the liberal politics and the reform movement of the time is his sympathy with the potential opponents: although, as an apprentice to Sir Hugo Mallinger, Daniel shares the ideology of the Whigs, he is strongly drawn to the valorization of traditions represented by the Tories. He is “fervently democratic in his feeling for the multitude,” yet “through his affections and imagination, intensely conservative; voracious of speculation on government and religion, yet loath to part with long-sanctioned forms which, for him, [are] quick with memories and sentiments” (364). As a secret outsider, sensitive to the insecurity of his position, Daniel is drawn to the ethical aspects of the traditional forms of life just as much as, in the novel’s other plotline, Grandcourt, the legal heir to estates and rank, is obsessed with the aesthetic externals of his status. Moreover, Daniel’s painful misapprehension of his place in Sir Hugo’s household at the symbolic (Bar Mitzvah) age of thirteen promotes his responsiveness to the suffering of others and sympathy for the predicament of the losing side of each struggle. Therefore, “as soon as he took up any antagonism, though only in thought, he seemed to himself like the Sabine warriors in the memorable story—with nothing to meet his spear but flesh of his flesh, and objects he loved” (364). Deronda is, a century ahead of his time, what Richard Rorty (1989: xv) has called “a liberal ironist”—one who resists a complete surrender of his identity to the imperiousness of a larger ideological frame.

Daniel refrains from placing himself in the British political arena not only because he is reluctant to commit himself to a consistent party platform but also because he fears loss of self. The expression of this fear is couched in terms of compromises with his personal integrity into which politics might force him: “I don’t want to make a living out of opinions. . . . I can’t see any

5. For a discussion of a network of similar thematic links between different episodes and subplots of Daniel Deronda, see Daleski 1985: 27–38.

6. I agree with Susan Ostrov Weisser (1990: 6) that “Deronda’s ego boundaries are markedly permeable” and that his sympathies are broad, yet calling these sympathies “chameleon-like” is one of the cavalier sound bites that mar Weisser’s valuable comments on the desireless sexual power play in the novel.
real public expediency that does not keep an ideal before it which makes a limit of deviation from the direct path. But if I were to set up for a public man I might mistake my own success for public expediency” (384). This is Daniel’s secret meeting point with Gwendolen, who dreads her liability to impulsive wrongdoing and whom he advises to turn her dread into a safeguard. He himself acts in the spirit of his advice: aware of the danger of confusing the personal and the public, he seeks, and eventually finds, a vocation in which the need for distinguishing between his self-actualization and the public good would be much less insistent.⁷ Meantime, however, he objects to political “humbug.” Sir Hugo’s reference to a possible “good style” of humbug as opposed to a “bad style” does not suffice to overcome Daniel’s ethical fastidiousness on the issues of party politics.

Ironically, this attitude is an ethical counterpart of Grandcourt’s aesthetical squeamishness that attracts Gwendolen’s interest. Grandcourt and Gwendolen meet in their shared intolerant awareness of “what brutes his fellow creatures were, both masculine and feminine; what odious familiarities they had, what smirks, what modes of flourishing their handkerchiefs, what costume, what lavender water, what bulging eyes, and what foolish notions of making themselves agreeable by remarks which were not wanted” (670–71). In his early (eventually surmounted) disgust with the pawnbroker Ezra Cohen and his family, Daniel displays his own tendency to share the leisure-class aesthetics epitomized by Grandcourt. Gwendolen eventually tries to train herself in Deronda’s preference for ethical rather than aesthetic discriminations, though her aesthetic fastidiousness in human relations remains deeply ingrained.

The sense of physical disgust in George Eliot’s presentations of the pawnbroker’s family has given rise to some readers’ suspicions that underneath the proto-Zionist ideas in the novel lies the kind of residual anti-Semitism that makes exceptions for those Jews who, like Mirah, Daniel, and his mother, do not display any would-be typical “Jewish peculiarities” (225)⁸ or whose

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⁷. Andrew Miller regards the portrayal of Daniel Deronda (a version of “Waverly, sixty years hence,” 2008: 74) as an instance of George Eliot’s characteristic dramatization of “the tension between a theory of morality that stresses the importance of perspective (a theory furthered by the genre in which she is working) and an unflagging belief in the duty of choice” (70).

⁸. Such suspicions are particularly clearly articulated in Meyer 1993: 747. For many years, the pressures of political correctness (genuine or otherwise) made it almost a relief to read the product of responses that have not been self-censored and that do not avoid words such as “lurk,” “repugnant,”
uncouth racially marked physique is either refined and transcended (by Mordecai’s combination of disease and spirituality) or redeemed (by Klesmer’s “genius”). It may, however, be argued that the unattractive Jewish “specimen[s]” (206) in the novel are offered as a challenge to the expansion of sympathy that George Eliot called for in her essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1901: 360). In *Daniel Deronda* the treatment of sympathy is significantly more complex and ambivalent (see During 1998) than in George Eliot’s previous works.

Indeed, several types of sympathy can be distinguished in the novel. One of them is ideological, and it consists in the acceptance, or toleration, of alien, unshared affects of the cultural other. Mordecai, for instance, is practically resigned to the vulgarity, false claims, and intellectual limitations of the Cohens. His tolerant, self-disciplining attitude to the cultural inferiority they represent is an *ideological* commitment: their mild misrule is accommodated by a slot in his fixed conceptual network. In an effort to win Daniel to his messianic cause, Mordecai attempts to turn the Cohens into objects of Daniel’s sympathy by suggesting that it is the diaspora condition that causes the “spiritual poverty of the Jewish millions” (571). And yet this sympathetic condescension is shown to be misplaced and to shrink its objects in the eyes of the observer: Mordecai, it turns out, underestimates the Cohens when he expects them to be unhappy on meeting Mirah because they have lost the daughter of the family: to everyone’s surprise the Cohens are not resentful—they transcend their hidden sorrow and extend to Mirah a wholehearted welcome. Daniel is, of course, even less of a fair judge than Mordecai: his early exposure to “ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations” (206) and his superficial early observation of Jews in London streets have lowered the threshold of his attention to whatever might further feed his prejudice. Behind his back, however, the implied author sends different signals to the reader. For example, whereas Gwendolen has to lock her knife in a box and a drawer for fear of her own violence, the Cohens make their little scion Jacob a gift of a knife and allow him to play with it, "hateful and contaminating," or "unpleasant fact" that one might wish to "fumigate and becloud" (206–7), especially when they come from an author who is ideologically opposed to anti-Semitism (these days, however, untrammeled anti-Semitism has made it back into the media, again calling into question the point where gut-feeling frankness of speech turns into abusive incitation to violence). Bernard Harrison believes that the aesthetically tinged “social” anti-Semitism, amply present throughout the history of English literature, is less dangerous than the political anti-Semitism that purports to struggle against what it sees as pan-Jewish political conspiracy (2006: 12–13).

9. Ortwin de Graef (2010) notes a dialectics between Mordecai’s movement towards transnational humanism through the restitution of national selfhood to the Jews and the sense of emotional leaning towards one’s own ethnicity expressed in George Eliot’s *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. 
evaluate it, boast of it, compare it with other knives: apparently, they have no reason to fear any violent impulses that the knife may bring out.

Even after having moved towards Mordecai’s attitude of ideological sympathy for the stunted Jewish population that he comes to see as awaiting a Zionist redemption, Daniel does not develop the resonating type of sympathy with the Jewish environment. This, however, is part of a more general pattern: hardly ever, in the course of the novel, is the emotion of any one character shown to enter into a synergetic unison with that of another. All the symbolic and literal ingredients of Dickensian resonating sympathy are evoked in different episodes of Daniel Deronda but never really combined to produce this boundary-crossing phenomenon itself. When Klesmer sits down to observe and evaluate Mirah’s singing, the hearts of the four Meyrick ladies are “beating fast in anxiety” (483), but this resonant pulsation is not publicly expressed and therefore not transformed into a carnivalesque pooling of affects. As this example shows, the object of the resonant sympathy is not the person who also feels it but the one towards whom an attitude is shared. It is not so much the drunken Marmeladov whom Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov pities—together with Marmeladov he grieves for his wife and for his daughter Sonia, enhancing the emotion of the reader by the sense of synergetic resonance.

By contrast, Mordecai’s Zionist speech in the club does not arouse the interest of more than a few of his listeners. The narrative refers to the imperious “chord” (503) in Mordecai’s voice when he claims Daniel’s allegiance, but Daniel’s ultimate endorsement of Mordecai’s goals is caused not by psychological contagion, not by a resonating string, and not even by a consent to extend a dying man’s life by his own; it is a matter of a rational persuasion on a subject in which—as during his eventide boating trips—his own “thinking and desiring melt together” (188). Vibrating chords, music, synchronized heartbeats, contagion, sympathy, cooperation—all these potential constituents of resonant Dionysian sympathy, of the horizontal blending of individual selves and the dissolution of boundaries between them, are referred to but held in check in the novel. With the one telling exception of the three Cohen children crying in cacophonous unison (574), individuals’ affects are insulated from each other, as if to preempt the type of carnivalesque crowd experience against which, a century later, the poetically heightened phenomenology of Elias Canetti’s Crowds and Power would sound a warning.

Unlike resonating sympathy, which is allowed to remain only in remoter backgrounds of the novel’s action, a third kind of sympathy is rather massively staged, namely the redistributive variety that consists not of pooling but of rationing the affect. The mechanism is described by the eighteenth-century economist and philosopher Adam Smith, who bases his understanding of sympathy on one’s ability to “enter” into the situation of the other: detailing the causes of one’s grief to others allays part of the pain by transferring a diluted portion of it to the listeners while also entering into their experience of listening to oneself:

As nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it. As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation. As their sympathy makes them look at it in some measure with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence, and acting under their observation: and, as the reflected passion which he thus conceives is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence. (23–24)

As if to prove that there is a considerable measure of economics in morality and, conversely, of ethics in economics, Adam Smith’s view suggests that the sum total of suffering does not change within an encapsulated situation. Rather, its amount is redistributed: the listener shoulders part of it, relieving the speaker of the onus. As in Bakhtin’s pageant without footlights, the boundary between the spectator (listener) and the performer (speaker, sufferer) is permeable: part of the affect moves from the latter to the former. In contrast to carnivalesque affects, while there is an element of interchangeability in this traffic across the borderlines of the self, there is no pooling of emotion, no blending: each subject steps in and out of the other’s position in a move to imagine what he or she would feel in the other’s footgear.

11. For this observation I am indebted to Michael Benedikt, in conversation.
12. This kind of offering of the self as a container for the suffering of another can actually be more readily described in terms of Lent (see chapter 10).
Such choreographic sympathy is what characterizes Gwendolen’s need for Deronda, and it is what has prompted Lisabeth During, for instance, to point to the major problem with this need: in the process of sympathy, part of the individual emotional life, ambitions, goals, loyalties, and beliefs of the sympathetic listener may be erased.\textsuperscript{13} When the listener takes over some of the speaker’s burden of pain, part of the listener’s own personality shrinks. Such a self-mortification can, in principle, be salutary for both sides, but in \textit{Daniel Deronda} the danger of excessive sympathy to its donor is emphasized at least as strongly as its positive effects on its recipient.

The theme of the reduction, cancellation, suppression, surrender of one’s own self under the sway of sympathy is given striking expression when Daniel neglects his own studies at Cambridge in order to save Hans Meyrick’s; he thus forfeits his own possible alternative vocation, that of mathematician. Incidentally, the choice of mathematics as the subject for which Daniel is gifted has a double effect: mathematics notoriously represents an abstract sphere of intellectual labor that sharply contrasts with the warm-hearted practical commitments that he will undertake at the end of the novel; yet it is also a thematic complement to Klesmer’s music as a possible vocation for Gentile or Jew.\textsuperscript{14}

Another example of the theme of the self-immolating effect of sympathy is provided by Hans Meyrick himself—in his story of “Bouddha giving himself to a famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving” (465). Mab Meyrick’s response to this parable of supererogation is a utilitarian irony: as a result of such actions, “[t]he world would get full of fat tigers” (466)—if sympathy is not hedged in, its object may end up consuming its source.

\textit{Daniel Deronda} effects a double \textit{tour de force}: it links sympathy with

\textsuperscript{13} “The action of sympathy fills up all the empty spaces where a private subjectivity might come to exist. The object enjoying the sympathy is encouraged to think that the sympathizer truly ‘lives’ in them. And this has the effect of making it very difficult for the dynamic of sympathy to be reciprocal. The more you respond to and indeed uncover my needs, the less likely I am to imagine your life and needs apart from me. In this sense sympathy acts as an incentive to egoism, rather than as its corrective” (During 1998: 77). Moreover, contrary to the common belief that sympathy expands one’s world, its immediate effect may be, like that of physical pain, the contraction of the subject’s own consciousness—not just of the reflection of this consciousness in the mind of the recipient. Which is not to deny that this asceticism may have long-term redemptive effects.

\textsuperscript{14} William Myers associates Klesmer’s vocation with politics, suggesting that, like art and ritual, political, philosophical, and ethical theories “work on the affective life independently of their purely intellectual value” (1971: 115). Unfortunately, Myers’s disapproval of George Eliot’s belief in the personal human agency in the direction of these forces leads him into untenable statements such as “the central characters, cut off from society, are thereby turned into mere puppets. The conviction that personality determines history has paradoxically deprived George Eliot’s major characters of distinctive personalities in their own right” (1971: 121).
the metaphor of anthropophagy and yet exonerates Mordecai Cohen of consuming another human being. Mordecai’s terminal tuberculosis generates his desire to extend his life through blending with another, yet on meeting Daniel he does not try to appeal for personal sympathy. Unlike Gwendolen, Mordecai seeks not so much to appropriate Daniel’s attention, his self, his life, but to elicit his resonating sympathy with the cause. Insofar as he wishes to erase the boundaries between himself and Daniel through what he misnames “the marriage of our souls,” it is not through consuming but through being consumed. He wishes to be internalized by Daniel, in the “blent transmission” (751) of ideas and yearnings—a likely effect of mourning as well as ideological consent. If there is a morbid side to this desire to feed the spirit of another by his own, it is symbolized by his offer that his writings should be published under Daniel’s name. It can, of course, be argued that in this craving to blend with another, the wish to be consumed is tantamount to the wish to consume. In the novel, however, the theme of cannibalism is diverted from Mordecai to the mentally sadistic Grandcourt, who is compared to an alligator (157), a stalking predator (412), a lizard (137, 587). Grandcourt becomes a decoy for a motif that might have marred the portrayal of the novel’s main exponent of idealistic supererogation.

Whereas the final part of the novel tells the story of Daniel’s accepting his new vocation, it also tells the story of his gently resisting the personal demands of Gwendolen and Mordecai alike, since Gwendolen might present an obstacle to his ideological agenda and Mordecai might signify the wrong reason for its pursuit. It is out of conviction born through the questioning of the principles of others while putting his own assumptions at stake, rather than in surrender to an ideologist’s charisma or in a Buddha-like compassion, that Daniel chooses his course of action. This is not to deny the role

17. This figurative language actually conflicts with the psychology of sadism—at least in its Schopenhauerian interpretation (see 1969, I: 364)—that seems to underlie George Eliot’s presentation of this phenomenon: the precondition of the perpetrator’s sadistic enjoyment is his (misguided, Schopenhauer would say) sense of total separateness between himself and his victim (cf. also McCobb 1985).
of feeling, especially love for Mirah, in Daniel’s choices. Though, as noted above, Daniel Deronda is not a carnivalesque novel, it shares a key modal feature with the genre of the Socratic dialogues (which Bakhtin regarded as proto-carnivalesque): its protagonist is engaged in ideological maieutics. In most of the episodes where he appears, Daniel is presented as an active and often tone-setting party to charged conversations with exponents of a variety of ethical principles. Unlike Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, he seldom seeks to persuade interlocutors; instead, through tactful argument, he attempts to construct his own aims and principles. His ultimate choice of the proto-Zionist course in which generalizable intellectual conclusions blend with his love for a particular woman may be regarded as a refraction of the ad hominem twists to which Socrates occasionally takes recourse in the process of philosophical argument.

Mordecai is but one in the series of spokesmen for Daniel’s ideological options; the sway of his personality is, emphatically, not the sole reason for Daniel’s making this particular choice. George Eliot mildly subverts Mordecai’s stature by the end of the novel, in particular in the ethical argument which he holds with Mirah and which pertains to the fine-tuning of the ethical stance of the novel as a whole.

In order to emphasize his point about personal sacrifice (“Burn, burn indiscernibly into that which shall be, which is my love and not me”), Mordecai tells his sister what he believes to be a Midrashic story of “a Jewish maiden who loved a Gentile king so well, that this is what she did:—She entered into prison and changed clothes with the woman who was beloved by the king, that she might deliver that woman from death by dying in her stead, and leave the king to be happy in his love which was not for her” (735). For Mordecai, this is “the surpassing love, that loses self in the object of love,” but Mirah sees it not as a case of supererogation but as one of psychological egoism: the Jewish maiden “wanted the king when she was dead to know what she had done, and feel that she was better than the other. It was her strong self, wanting to conquer, that made her die.” She goes on to argue that the maiden “must have had jealousy in her heart, and she wanted somehow to have the first place in the king’s mind. That is what she would die for.”

Mordecai has nothing but an unfair ad hominem argument against this position:

“My sister, thou hast read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as in dwelling demons, unmixed with the

18. On Kantian supererogation and the place of uncommon virtue in the Aristotelian view of character, see the dialogue between Baron 1987 and Sherman 1988.
relenting and devout elements of the soul. Thou judgest by the plays, and
not by thy own heart, which is like our mother’s.”

Mirah made no answer. (735)

Mirah’s tactful silence in response to her brother’s patronizing rejoinder is, under the influence of his allusion to her heart, all too easily read as referring to the nature of her jealous love for Daniel. This is another decoy, since at issue is not Mirah’s but Mordecai’s supererogation. By presenting the self-sacrificing Jewish maiden as a kind of Henry Jamesian Milly Theale, who succeeds, after her death, in taking precedence over Kate Croy in Densher’s heart (or else as the case of Dickens’s Carton translated into a version of psychological egoism), Mirah demystifies Mordecai’s idealistic exegesis. Her undermining of the parable of supererogation may send the reader back to the remarks on St. Theresa of Avila in the Prelude of George Eliot’s Middlemarch, where the traditional concerns of the Spanish lady are presented as “light fuel” to a brilliant girl, whereas a demanding spiritual or ideological cause is expected to provide a more sustaining nourishment: “Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self” (1977: xiii). The figurative language, the metaphors of consuming and being consumed that align Dorothea Brook of Middlemarch as an avatar of St. Theresa with the prophet of Zionism in Daniel Deronda, pit the belief in supererogation against skepticism about the motives for self-sacrifice—as possibly originating in the pursuit of exalted or triumphant states of the soul.

This hesitation about the moral credit of idealism if fuelled by personal need is consistent with the novel’s cautious bracketing of the transgression of boundaries between the self and the other or the self and the larger whole. As I have been trying to show, carnivalesque narratives generally tend to explore and develop the higher view of human possibility, a nonutilitarian ethics of a predominantly deontological kind, which posits human capacity for totally disinterested action, idealistic self-sacrifice, and a yearning for good for its own sake while also recognizing the profundity of the evil of which a human

19. As this episode strongly suggests, Mordecai is not the spokesman for the author. Though Edward Said critiques Mordecai’s formulation of his Zionist vision as if it reflected George Eliot’s own mental patterns (1980: 62–66), the fact that at the end of the novel Daniel embarks on a mission of fact-finding rather than immediate implementation of Mordecai’s thoughts confirms the distance between the implied author of the novel and its ideologist character. For an important critical processing of Said’s views see also Henry 2002: 113–23.
being is capable. By contrast, the non-carnivalesque narratives lean towards utilitarian ethics and the Aristotelian golden mean, towards skepticism about altruistic service of ideals yet also towards a denial of the existence of radical evil, towards a moderate pitch of legitimate ethical expectations. The uneasy modal affiliation of Daniel Deronda, a non-carnivalesque narrative that provides a testing ground for different forms of the carnivalesque blurring of boundaries, especially in its treatment of the issues of vocation or of sympathy, is associated with a hesitancy in the novel’s ultimately middle-ground moral vision. Narratives in which the carnivalesque flights and lapses of the human spirit are present in a limited or selective way often tend to negotiate the relationship between utilitarian and deontological criteria for attributing moral credit. Whereas the plots of both Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda trace possibilities of the convergence of individual integrity and self-interest, sacrifices made to personal integrity in these novels do not coincide with supererogatory impulses. Yet the novel’s caution about idealistic supererogation is not characterized by an Aristotelian preference for the middle way in the practice of virtue. Rather, it stages a dialectics between a commitment to future-oriented social goals and emotionally alert sympathy for individual human beings. The here-and-now workings of sympathy may impede the service of those goals and, if unhedged, may produce an alternative form of Buddha-like supereration for the sake of fat tigers. In its absence, however (as is amply demonstrated in Dostoevsky’s novels, especially The Possessed), supererogation threatens to transform into nihilism (cf. Wolf 1982).20

In Daniel Deronda, despite the rationalist individualism suggested by the balance between the agenda of self-perfection and that of service to causes outside the self, idealistic supererogation is nevertheless not devoid of glamour. Boundaries of the self are repeatedly transcended or transgressed—eventually to be redrawn, but redrawn in order to be opened up again—for a sympathetic seepage of affect in interpersonal relationships and for an exchange of creative energy between the self and a larger whole. The types of cultural remission evoked in Daniel Deronda (as in most of George Eliot’s novels) emerge not so much as pauses in self-perpetuating deterministic regularity but as new lines of development, best appreciated with the benefit of hindsight.

20. The issue of nihilism as involving the service of a vision of the future at the expense of emotional response to one’s human environment in the present is analyzed in Tzachi Zamir’s 2000 essay on Macbeth.
In terms of legitimating an ethical ideology alternative to the dominant system of values, *Daniel Deronda* is more radically oppositional than Austen’s *Mansfield Park* or *Persuasion*, yet the cultural remission that it may represent for its mainstream audience is still circumscribed. The novel creates a path towards liberal irony: the readers are assisted in entering the minds and conditions of the people who make ideological choices different from their own. The resulting tolerant sympathy for the politics and ethics of another highlights the contingency of one’s own ideological stance without necessarily proposing to alter this stance. The textual conditions for allowing the reader this freedom of commitment lie in the comparatively low degree of resonating sympathy with the main characters: the element of vicarious experience in the reader response to the Deronda plotline (in contrast to the Gwendolen plotline) tends to be of the cognitive, ethical, intellectual, rather than of the emotional, kind.

The response of the reader is also affected by the recurrent staging of redistributive sympathy: by “sharing” their suffering with others Mirah or Gwendolen or Mrs. Davilow actually transfer a part of it to their listeners. Redistributive sympathy cannot be simulated by the reader in relation to a fictional character; it can take effect only in an actual deictic situation. We cannot alleviate the suffering of the fictional character by reading about it any more than we can prevent the murder of Desdemona or the drowning of Melville’s *Pequod*. Yet on reading about the acute unattested individual suffering caused by social injustice or political atrocity we often respond to the sense of our own helplessness by an extratextual political commitment: generations of Russian revolutionaries grew up on the diet of literary refractions of brutal social oppression. Conversely, the topos of deathbed comfort—dying Jo sheltered by Dr. Woodcourt’s semireligious care in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Pip attending on the dying Magwitch in *Great Expectations* and Abel Whittle on Henchard in Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the heroine’s father and aunt coming home to die surrounded by sympathetic friends in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*—stages the redistributive sympathy that can mitigate the effect of the characters’ pain. In contrast, for instance, to the solitary death of Jude in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* or the unwitnessed murders of K. in Kafka’s *The Trial* or of Winston Smith in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*, this topos (at times debased to a sentimental convention\(^21\)) suggests that the given social order is not irredeemable. It may also be noted that in such episodes of redistributive sympathy it is usually the surviving

\(^{21}\) This convention is not to be confused with the topos of the dying person’s last words, whose ethical phenomenology is usually of a totally different kind.
carer rather than the dying sufferer who attracts the participative emotion of the reader. Both the latter effects are brilliantly yet disturbingly explored in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*.

The subliminal ethical effects of narrative form can, of course, be trumped by special sensitivities. For great numbers of Jewish readers, who have been responding resonantly to Mordecai’s sympathy for diaspora Jews in the context of their own life experience, the novel has been a prophesy and a call to Zionist action. Yet this virtual interpretive community was not George Eliot’s target audience.