Title of Paper: Explorations in George Eliot’s Perception of Islam: Arabs, Jews & the Question of Palestine
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Section: Articles
Date of Publication: January, 2017
Issue: Vol. 5, No. 1

Abstract:
This article proposes to explore George Eliot’s perception of Islam in close comparison with her interest in Judaism. I will demonstrate that Eliot’s much keener and more sympathetic attitude towards Jews and Judaism is clearly paralleled by an essentially prejudiced view of Arabs and an obvious indifference to Islam. I shall also examine how this privileged status of Judaism shaped Eliot’s political thought in regard to both her ideal of British nationalism and her vision of an ideal human world. This discussion will be contextualized with reference to the ongoing scholarly conversation about Eliot’s attitude to colonialism, nationalism, and religion as in the works of Edward Said, Saleel Nurbhai & K. M. Newton, Nancy Henry, and Avrom Fleishman.

Keywords: George Eliot, Judaism, Islam, Arabs, Palestine, nationalism.

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This article proposes to explore George Eliot’s attitude to Islam in close comparison with her interest in Judaism at a time when the project of the return of the Jews to Palestine and the idea of founding a national Jewish state there started to circulate widely among Victorian political and intellectual circles. The article will first examine Eliot’s religious background in search of any relevant elements that are likely to help the reader understand how her religious thought was shaped through the various changes that occurred in her personal faith throughout her life, and determine the reasons behind her late interest in Judaism and Jewish culture, and her writing of Daniel Deronda. These elements, in turn, will re-emerge in the discussion of her political stance on Judaism and the question of the restoration of the Jews in Palestine, alongside an exploratory incursion into her views on colonialism. This discussion will try to determine where precisely her sympathies rest by examining the reasons — whether religious, cultural or political — behind them, and where precisely Islam stands among the other religions for which she repeatedly claimed by the end of her life that she had great reverence. The article argues that Eliot’s much keener and more sympathetic attitude towards Jews and Judaism is clearly paralleled by an essentially prejudiced view of Arabs and an obvious indifference to Islam. It will equally demonstrate how this privileged status of Judaism shaped Eliot’s political thought in regard to both her ideal of British nationalism and her vision of an ideal human world, showing no consideration in her last novel for the Arab native residents in Palestine, despite the fact that she was well informed of their historical presence there from time immemorial.

1. Eliot’s religious “sentiment” and her “peculiar debt” to Judaism

Critics and biographers have always been aware of Eliot’s unstable religious itinerary that followed an evangelical orientation in her youth, and then would abruptly change course to adopt free thought and agnosticism, and eventually reject dogmatic Christianity amid the turbulent Victorian crisis of faith induced by German Biblical criticism and the evolution of Science. Towards the end of her life Eliot experienced a revival of interest in the religious “sentiment” through which pervaded her recent adoption of Judaism and reverence for all the great religions as she called them. Of course, this discussion is more interested in grasping the mature Eliot’s perspective on Judaism through which we can hopefully frame a fair picture of where Islam stands in relation to both Jewish religion and nationhood in Eliot’s line of thought.

Nurbhai and Newton in George Eliot, Judaism and the Novels argue that “central to Deronda’s triumph is the Zionist aim, which has golem implications. Restoration of the Jewish state is completion of the Jewish people. It is also a return to the Promised Land, which in turn is analogous with the return to Paradise which signals the messianic ‘Age of Aquarius’ ” (177). The golem

1. The Arabic word “ghulem” shares the same Hebrew Semitic, and also means “servant”. Deronda may be seen as a nation’s “servant” who has a mission to accomplish i.e. Mordecai’s dream of return to the Promised Land.
“element” is a key mythological notion of “completion” and “fulfillment” around which Nurbhai and Newton’s reading of *Daniel Deronda* (and other novels) is constructed, but it is not essential to the current discussion. What is certainly more relevant is that the *triumph* of Deronda is nothing more than the Zionist aim with its three objectives: completion of the Jewish people; return to the Promised Land; restoration of the Jewish state.

It is clear that along with her interest in Jewish faith and mysticism, Eliot also imbibed the ideological component inherent in Judaism as it is the only covenant-based monotheistic religion: no other monotheistic religion of the remaining two compels its followers to adhere to an ancestral Abrahamic story into which both the divine and the political are inextricable in so far as the idea of completion (as Nurbhai and Newton call it) or construction (as Eliot calls it) depends so much on the availability of land — not any land, but only that which has been Promised by Him, and without which there can be no completed, constructed Jewish nation or state. Judaism may possibly have survived over the millennia because it used its visionary and prophetic power to plant in the minds of its wandering disciples the seeds of a Land Promised by God to the elect among his many other children. It is in fact this genuine belief by Judaism in its exclusive selection by the Divine to accomplish a special mission that constitutes its spiritual as well as its ideological force. It may also be judicious to note that Judaism has this unique specificity of a religion of the past whose fulfillment is scheduled in a promised future\(^2\). And this singular combination of “a religion of the past with a nationalism of the future” forms a model which Eliot ultimately “embraced” (Henry, *Life of GE* 231).

There is also another dimension intrinsic to the very nature of Eliot’s perspective on Judaism, which may be derived from Eliot’s earlier poem *The Spanish Gypsy* where the Andalusian Jew Sephardo declares that “Israel / Is to the nations as the body’s heart” (159) or, again, from Nurbhai and Newton’s analysis of *Daniel Deronda* in the form of dispersed quotes: “Israel is seen as the heart of the world’s nations” (189) so “the world’s nations will grow around it” (189), but “before the world becomes a universal human community, however, Israel must come together. The world lacks a heart to bind it, and without that central feature, it is merely a set of separate elements” (146). This additional dimension, that Eliot makes manifest in *Daniel Deronda* and in “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” completes her perspective on Judaism by fostering the self-centered image of the Jewish people in regard to both their privileged political and religious statuses among the other nations and religions of the world.

Such ideas of self-centeredness inherent in the elect may also lead to unsteady grounds as those where Nurbhai and Newton, involving Eliot in their argument, apparently want to take us when they unambiguously write:

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2. To avoid any anachronism, the “promised future” is to be understood in chronological reference to the Victorian era.
Since the establishment of a Jewish nation would be an initiatory influence on liberal nationalism elsewhere, the cohesion of the Arabs into a national force would, in this case, be dependent on the establishment of Israel. It was Eliot’s view that nationalism, based on the Jewish formation of Zion, would not incite antagonism but would bring about the formation of interdependent societies, which in turn would culminate in the achievement of a global community. The zeal which would inspire the Arabs would be inextricable from the foundation of Israel. (152)

I believe that Nurbhai and Newton are more than right in the above quote because they precisely understood what Eliot actually meant when she made Deronda speak about the Arabs’ potential revival and “great outburst of force” (*DD* 2:360). However, I would also like to draw the reader’s attention to how Nurbhai and Newton’s reasoning in the above quote is constructed: its starting point is a pure theoretical assumption taken to mean literally nothing but what it suggests. Hence the establishment of the state of Israel is presented as the sine qua non for “the cohesion of the Arabs into a *national force*” or “The zeal which would inspire the Arabs” [emphasis added] (Nurbhai & Newton 152). The reader must have by now clearly noticed that discussing Judaism as a religion will always entail its other intrinsic ideological or political component — which, in the case of such sensitive issue as the one discussed in this article, would inevitably lead to the question of territorial sovereignty.

The idea of self-centeredness also pervades the emergence of the Jewish state as an ideal model of harmony and stability for the whole world as Eliot herself “came to see the restoration of Israel as the dispensation which would lead to the *ideal state for the world*” [emphasis added] (Nurbhai & Newton 178). Even Britain is invited by Theophrastus/Eliot to get inspired by and follow in the wake of the restored Jewish state and nation since “to regain its national shape or identity, it should learn from the example of the solidarity of Judaism and the Jewish nation in forming itself” (Nurbhai & Newton 189). And even when Eliot clearly acknowledges British colonialism for the first time in her writings, her mea culpa is formulated according to Jewish-defining criteria: “We do not call ourselves a dispersed and a punished people; we are a colonising people, and it is we who have punished others” [emphasis added] (“TM Hep!”188). No other people, except Jews, were considered by Eliot as typically “dispersed” and “punished”.

Eliot, however, seems to have forgotten her former adoption of ideas which are commonly considered today as “anti-Semitic” when, in her thirties, she wrote:

> My Gentile nature kicks most resolutely against any assumption of superiority in the Jews, and is almost ready to echo Voltaire’s vituperation ... much of their early mythology, and almost all their history, is utterly revolting ... .The very exaltation of their idea of a national deity into a spiritual monotheism seems to have been
borrowed from the other oriental tribes. Everything specifically Jewish is of a low grade. (Cross 88)

Here is a sample of Voltaire’s vituperation that Eliot was “almost ready to echo”: “The Jewish people were, I own, extremely barbarous and merciless; massacring all the inhabitants of a wretched country, to which it had no more right than their vile descendants have to Paris or London” (340).

In her letter to the American abolitionist novelist H. B. Stowe, on 29 October 1876 Eliot mentioned the Oriental peoples whom, like Jews, she “felt urged to treat … with such sympathy and understanding as [her] nature and knowledge could attain to” (Cross 653). However, I have not witnessed — so far in my investigation — any support or firm protest on her part, like that of Carlyle, Goethe or even Deutsch, when Islam and Muslims were wrongly offended by “the silly curses” (“Islam” 63) or “the outrageous misrepresentations” (“Islam” 64) of many European scholars and thinkers. Despite all the knowledge she had attained about Islamic culture, her intellectual stance on Islam was often shyly expressed, with a tendency to stand behind what she probably assumed to be safe intellectual neutrality — never an outright standpoint as the one we can witness in relation to the Jewish question in the above mentioned letter to Stowe.

Emmanuel Deutsch, Eliot’s Hebrew mentor and valuable source for the writing of her last novel Daniel Deronda, is the embodiment of the Biblical erudite Jewish who dreamed of returning to the Promised Land. Yet Deutsch’s Jewishness did not numb his sense of objectivity as a true scholar. In times when Mahommedanism was not an easy topic to bring about in Victorian discussions, this Jewish scholar had the intellectual courage to stand forth and acknowledge the world’s “peculiar debt” to medieval Arab-Islamic civilization:

the Arabs conquered a world greater than that of Alexander the Great, greater than that of Rome … they, alone of all Shemites, came to Europe as kings, whither the Phoenicians had come as tradesmen, and the Jews as fugitives or captives; came to Europe to hold up, together with these fugitives, the light to Humanity — they alone, while darkness lay around; to raise up the wisdom and knowledge of Hellas from the dead, to teach philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and the golden art of song to the West as well as to the East, to stand at the cradle of modern science, and to cause us late epigoni for ever to weep over the day when Granada fell3. (“Islam” 123)

There was not one single note in Eliot’s journals or one single line in her letters acknowledging — in more or less the same factual terms as Deutsch had done above — any of the cultural traces that those Arabs, Saracens or Moors might have

3 In his essay “Arabic Poetry in Spain and Sicily” Deutsch rephrases this idea of “fall” in a way that involves all humanity: “a fall ever to be wept over in the history of Spain, if not of humanity” (463).
left after their eight-century long presence in Europe. Although she spent with Lewes about three months (from January to March 1867) visiting Spain, particularly Southern Moorish Spain (ex *al-Andalus*⁴), staying in Granada, Cordova and Seville (Cross 490-91) during that same period when she was writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, and read many books related to Spain’s Arab history like *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain* translated by Gayangos, Gibbon & Ockley’s *History of the Saracen Empire* (Cross 485) or Arab philosophy like Renan’s *Averroes and Averrhoism* (Cross 501), she did not seem to have been in the least impressed by all that the Moors left behind in terms of culture or civilization.

Despite her contemporaries’ obvious interest in Islamic culture and religion, and despite the influences of Islamic Sufism on medieval Jewish mysticism that seems to have had a significant impact on her use of the mythical⁶ element in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot resolutely showed obvious interest in Judaism, and almost none in Islam. She partly justified this exclusive interest when she pointed to the spiritual kinship (“spiritual struggles”) (Haight 5:448) she (or Christianity?) felt with Judaism and on which her youth was equally “nourished” (Haight 5:448). The “eminence” of the Jewish people, which also explains her admiration for them and their interest in their religion, may clearly be decoded in the following quote: “The eminence, the nobleness of a people, depends on its capability of being stirred by memories, and of striving for what we call spiritual ends — ends which consist not in an immediate material possession, but in the satisfaction of a great feeling that animates the collective body as with one soul” (“TM Hep!”188). The historical heritage of a dramatic past with its racial and religious memory may also partly explain Eliot’s sympathy with and support for Judaism as is obvious in her choice of the German rabbi Zunz’s words that appear in the epigraph to chapter II in the second volume of *Daniel Deronda*:

> If there are ranks in sufferings, Israel takes precedence of all the nations — if the duration of sorrows and patience with which they are borne ennobles, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land — if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and the actors were also the heroes? (2:347)

Nurbhai and Newton explain Eliot’s interest in Judaism in a rather original way. In an appended note to their chapter “George Eliot and kabbalism” they succinctly write: “Perhaps one of the major reasons for Eliot’s attraction to Judaism

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⁴. Eliot justifies her use of the term *Andalus* instead of *Andalusia* as follows: “I have been questioned about my use of Andalus for Andalusia, but I had a sufficient authority for that in ’Mohammedan Dynasties,’ translated by Gayangos” (Cross 526).

⁵. The author of this book is Ahmed ibn Mohamed al-maqqari, a seventeenth-century historian, and native of Tlemcen, Algeria.

⁶. See Nurbhai & Newton pages 54, 89-90 and accompanying endnote 31 on page 203.
was its opposition to conversion which could be taken to mean that literal belief in its theology was not essential” (199-200), and then they quote Emmanuel Deutsch to support their point: “There was no occasion for conversion to Judaism, as long as a man fulfilled the seven fundamental laws. Every man who did so was regarded as a believer to all intents and purposes” (200). Such view may reasonably be accepted since we know that Eliot rejected Christianity because of its rigid dogma. Now that she had at last encountered a religion that did not in any way compel her to believe in dogma or theology, and that also matched both her firm belief in universal moral values and her ideal vision of humanity, why indeed shouldn’t she feel “attracted” to such religion and its followers? In his chapter entitled “Religion”, Lovesey goes even a little further than Nurbhai and Newton’s “attraction” to plainly affirm that Eliot “embraced Judaism” (238) — that is if we understand the term “embraced” for what it literally means.

Eliot apparently did not want her opinion on religion to be publicly known. In the closing lines of the above quoted 1873 letter to Cross in which she asserted that “all the great religions of the world historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy” (Haight 5:447-48) and in which, too, she admitted that “if there were not reasons against my following such an inclination, I should go to church or to chapel constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies” (448), Eliot cautiously urged Cross to “please put this in the fire. It is scribbled in explanation to you only, and not meant for other eyes” (448). However, it is equally plain from an 1874 letter to Mrs Ponsonby that she still clung to her agnostic faith when she wrote that “the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e. an exaltation of the human)” (Haight 6:98).

Despite her rejection of religious dogma in the early 1840s, she had striven ever since after a substitute for “the idea of God” because she knew that without it her construct of an ideal human world might well never come into existence. But having eventually found this substitute in “the ideal of a goodness entirely human”, she unfortunately could not manage to achieve such ideal in spite of her genuine desire to live by it and, therefore, failed to show for all religions and all the children of Adam the same degree of sympathy, concern, and interest.

2. Arabs and the restoration of the Jews in Daniel Deronda: the question of Palestine

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7. The Seven Laws to be observed by Noah and his family after God saved them from the flood: 1) to establish courts of justice; 2) to commit neither blasphemy; 3) nor idolatry; 4) nor incest or adultery; 5) nor bloodshed; 6) nor robbery; 7) not to eat flesh cut from a living animal. Available at <http://www.jewfaq.org/gentiles.htm>

8. George Levine likewise wrote: “George Eliot, who stopped believing in God but could not stop believing in divine ideals” (238).
Central to this article is the following core question regarding the Arab natives who had been living in the Holy Land of Jerusalem for centuries and about whom Eliot never said a word though she repeatedly mentioned the presence of the other two resident communities, Christians and Jews. Why?

Although the above question somewhat echoes Edward Said’s now too often cited and much criticized one it does not subscribe, however, to the same implications claimed by the eminent critic. Of all the contemporary ones (I have read so far) who have discussed this question on Eliot’s silence about the Arabs who lived in Palestine at the time, none has given a straightforward and convincing answer. I would not indulge in sterile polemic and speculate about the mysterious identity of the “superseded proprietors” in Daniel Deronda (3:68), but I feel urged to make a few points in response to Nancy Henry’s discussion of Said’s criticism when she writes:

Mordecai’s guiding vision concerns the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, lost to them centuries earlier, a dream frequently interpreted by critics of the novel as a form of Anglo-Jewish imperialism. Far from being Eliot’s call for Europeans to take what does not belong to them, the idea of the restoration of the Jews engages her sense of justice and reparation for wrongs committed, a view consistent with much of her fiction. (GE & TBE 118)

Although Henry keeps repeating that Mordecai is a fictional character who does not necessarily express the author’s opinion, she clearly makes Eliot’s “sense of justice” and “reparation for wrongs committed” against the Jews inextricable from the “idea of the restoration of the Jews” [emphasis added]. To avoid any controversy about this Mordecai/Eliot identity question we should turn to Theophrastus, Eliot’s last fictional creation more akin to herself in spirit and thought, whom Henry agrees to present as making one with “the author [who] multiplies, and is present as Marian Evans Lewes, Eliot, and Theophrastus” (GE & TBE 138), and whom she herself quotes to make her point in this discussion. It is true that Theophrastus/Eliot wonders whether Jews are “destined to complete fusion with the peoples among whom they are dispersed” or whether there are “in the political relations of the world, the conditions present or approaching for the restoration of a Jewish state planted on the old ground” [emphasis added] (“TM Hep!” 209-10). Yet, like Mordecai, Theophrastus/Eliot is also capable of flaring up and boldly asserting that “I share the spirit of the Zealots. I take the spectacle of the Jewish people defying the Roman edict, and preferring death by starvation or the sword to the introduction of Caligula’s deified statue into the temple, as a sublime type of steadfastness” (193). He/She likewise hopes for the rise of “some new Ezras, some modern Maccabees, who will know how to use all favouring outward conditions” and “triumph by heroic example” in “making their people once more one among the nations” [emphasis added] (211). It is quite clear that Mordecai’s “guiding vision” is brought into life by Theophrastus/Eliot and made into a real project of return whose ultimate goal is “a Jewish state planted on the old ground”. Eliot certainly had the firm belief and conviction that a Jewish state and nation would
unquestionably come into existence once those “favouring outward conditions” — “present” or “approaching” — were met.

Furthermore, when Henry assures her reader that “the idea of the restoration of the Jews engages her sense of justice and reparation for wrongs committed” (118), a simple question arises: how could Eliot then make reparation and pay her “peculiar debt” to the Jews if they were not restored to Palestine? Either this reparation should concretely and realistically take the form (as it actually did) of a historical return to the Promised Land or, otherwise, remain a purely naive fictional “fantasy” like *The Spanish Gypsy*’s homeland that Eliot decided to found in Carthage, North Africa which, in the fifteenth century (according to the historical setting of the poem), was an unquestionably Arab Muslim land. Henry eventually brings the discussion to an end telling us that “no one actually settles in the East” (119), and expresses her doubts as to whether Eliot really believed in the practicality of a Jewish state in the Holy Land.

In *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, Henry reiterates the above argument when she writes: “The idealist element of the fantasy leads us to ask how likely she really thought it was that Daniel Deronda would help to establish a Jewish state” (169). Such incongruity as the one that appears in both stories between Eliot’s noble human feelings of justice and sympathy for the landless Gypsies and Jews on the one hand and, on the other, her failure to make reparation to both, by literally settling the former in a purely imaginary homeland in Tunisia and keeping the latter away from the Promised Land, leads the reader to question Eliot’s credibility both as a writer and a committed intellectual. Henry serves best the present purpose in demonstrating Eliot’s loss of credibility both as a writer and a committed intellectual. Henry serves best the present purpose in demonstrating Eliot’s loss of credibility when she writes: “Her [Eliot’s] own practical support for nationalistic causes at this time seems to have been minimal. She refused, for example, to contribute money to Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini’s cause in 1865 (GEL 4:200), and she and Lewes had no sympathy with Thornie’s desire to fight the Russians for Polish independence” (169-70).

We know Eliot had read Salomon Munk’s *Palestine: Description géographique, historique et archéologique* (Irwin 39) in which she could find all the historical information she needed about the people who inhabited Palestine from time immemorial. Munk cited various Arab and also Christian sources to give vivid and objective descriptions of Jerusalem and its inhabitants since the Crusades, and even much earlier. In her notebooks Eliot quoted a long extract from an article published in *The Academy* in 1874 that supplied her with up-to-date information about the economy and the population of Jerusalem that amounted to 18,000 among whom 5000 Mohammedans, 8 to 9000 Jews and “the rest Xtians of various denominations”; she also significantly noted that “the country could support a population many times larger than its present scanty number of poverty-stricken inhabitants” (qtd. in Irwin 288). We know she also read Stanley’s *Palestine and Sinai*, and was well documented on the Jewish resettlement and state question well before the writing of *Daniel Deronda*; she had many acquaintances among politicians and intellectuals who were actively involved in the preparation of the Jewish return though Henry reassures her reader that Eliot “had no wish to align herself with the efforts of certain Jewish and
non-Jewish Englishmen, such as Moses Montefiore, Charles Warren, and Lawrence Oliphant9 to establish colonies in Palestine, perhaps because of her reservations about philanthropy in general or perhaps because of the aggressive Christianity that inspired men such as Warren and Oliphant” (GE & TBE 117).

Despite her obvious lack of certitude, Henry persists and quotes an 1879 letter from Eliot’s editor John Blackwood about “a cry H.E.P. to Jerusalem and I imagine that Oliphant is in some manner the forerunner of work in these parts” (117) to which Eliot, we are told, “replied evasively: ‘There is a great movement now among the Jews towards colonising Palestine, and bringing out the resources of the soil. Probably Mr. Oliphant is interested in the work, and will find his experience in the West not without applicability in the East’ ” [emphasis added] (117). This reply being interpreted as “evasive” makes Henry safely conclude that Eliot “has often been taken as an advocate of the colonization of Palestine based on isolated readings of Deronda, but her reluctance to celebrate early signs of its actual occurrence suggests that she distinguished between the idea of Jewish nationalism and the practices of religious (mostly Christian) colonizers” (117). Besides her evasiveness Henry again fails to correctly interpret Eliot’s lack of response to Blackwood’s second letter on the same question and in which the latter “thought that she, Benjamin Disraeli, and Oliphant were all ‘working to one end’ ” (117). If Henry was right in her conclusion that Eliot had no connection with such people and their project, I wonder why a lifelong friend and editor should persist in associating one of his authors he knew best with such people and such project. The other intriguing question is: how could this same lifelong friend and editor either misunderstand or be ignorant of Eliot’s (his best author) views on the question, particularly when Oliphant was also one of Blackwood’s regular authors and friend, and Lewes’ collaborator in founding the Fortnightly Review?

Moreover, by the time Daniel Deronda was published in monthly installments from February to September 1876, the Jewish financier Haim Guedalla, who was married to Sir Moses Montefiore’s niece and chaired the Turkish Bondholders of the General Debt of Turkey, began advocating the idea of paying the Ottoman government debt which amounted to £250,000,000 in exchange for acquisition of land by Jews in the Middle East10. Guedalla sent Eliot a copy of the pamphlet he had written on this debt, and her reply clearly confirms the idea that the Jewish project of restoration advocated by Montefiore’s great-nephew and his like, and her own “conceptions” were in no way contradictory: “it is something more than an interesting coincidence … that at the date you mention, last winter, when I happened to be writing precisely that scene at the club, your practical judgment was

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9 According to Avrom Fleishman, Oliphant was “a friend of John Blackwood and a potential collaborator with Lewes in founding the Fortnightly Review, [he] was also an enterprising colonialist” (202).

occupied with projects not in disagreement with my conceptions” (Haight 3:288). The scene referred to by Eliot is the one that appeared in “Revelations”, the sixth part of Daniel Deronda which was published in June 1876, and in which Mordecai clearly appeals for a Jewish state to be restored in Palestine. While Henry has interpreted Eliot’s reply to Blackwood’s first letter above as “evasive”, Avrom Fleishman finds it rather excited and notes that Eliot “seems quite sanguine about the prospect” [emphasis added] (203) — which consequently confirms not her “reluctance” (as Henry seems to suggest), but rather her willingness to “celebrate early signs of its actual occurrence” (GE & TBE 117), i.e. the colonization of Palestine.

Talking about Mordecai’s role in the novel, Fleishman believes him “closer to being the spokesman of a religion of humanity, Jewish division, than he is to being either a representative of the age-old Jewish anticipations of a messianic restoration or a predecessor of the political Zionism that emerged later in the century” (204). Fleishman, nevertheless, makes a parenthetical concession as he admits that “(in common with the latter (i.e. “political Zionism”), however, he emphasizes the value of a state in legitimizing and protecting Jews at home and abroad on the same basis as other states do for their citizens — that is, a secular and pragmatic objective)” (204). Mordecai also dreams of a secular republic for the Jews, and “though he is English by birth, his orientation toward Palestine is strong enough to make English citizenship and lifestyle irrelevant to him” (206). After much evasiveness, Fleishman eventually settles for a contented mid-position and writes that “it should not be difficult to accept that the messages to be taken from Daniel Deronda do not require its readers, past or present, to believe in or approve a Zionist solution to the Jewish problem” (212). Only one page further, amid the list of Daniel’s acquisitions from Mordecai, Fleishman includes “projects of the proto-Zionists”, and then echoes the same idea when he notes further down the same paragraph: “The effects of Mordecai’s discourses are not to be measured by Daniel’s beliefs, although he does subscribe to the former’s proto-Zionism.” Now, the obvious question is the following: is Mordecai a “predecessor of the political Zionism that emerged later in the century” or is he not? Fleishman has obviously lost the thread of his argument and ends up with contradictory statements about a fundamental issue in the current discussion.

In “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” Edward Said notes “the total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of the East, Palestine in particular” (20) in Eliot’s Daniel Deronda. This observation makes Nurbhai and Newton accuse Said of being partial in his reading of the novel since he “fails to mention Deronda’s comment on the Arabs” (151). We should now examine this comment so importantly cited by these co-authors to justify Said’s partial interpretation of the novel. Talking about the possibility for nationalities to witness a revival, Deronda says: “A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life ... Nations have revived. We may live to see a great outburst of force in the Arabs, who are being inspired with a new zeal.” To which Pash reacts, in the same discussion: “That may hold with backward nations” (2:360). It is striking how
Deronda’s comment seems to echo Emmanuel Deutsch’s\(^{11}\) when the latter wrote in “Three Lectures on Semitic culture”: “there is certainly now a pause, or rather retrogression in the mental life of that great people: its causes will, however, most surely be amended, and the Arab Shemite will once more take his share in the ruling of the world’s destinies” (172). It is equally striking how both Pash’s and Deutsch’s comments seem to be formulated in synonymic terms as the former assimilated Arabs into the common lot of “backward nations” and the latter pointed to “retrogression” in their “mental life”.

One could unhesitatingly argue that following Deronda’s above-quoted statement about Arabs Mordecai, the Jewish patriarch and prophetic Hebrew figure in the novel, responded in a very positive way to the revival of Arab nationalism when he said “Amen” twice and expressed “a delight which was the beginning of recovered energy” (2:360). After a much closer reading, however, it appears that Deronda’s comment in the novel about the Arabs’ potential revival and “great outburst of force” serves no other purpose but to remind Mordecai of the equally potential revival of Jewish nationalism and confirm or strengthen his conviction that his prophecy of both a strong Jewish nation and state will soon come true, which obviously induced his Amens, his “delight” and his “recovered energy”. Needless to say that no Arab national revival is ever likely to cause Mordecai’s delight or recovered energy. Semmel, too, seems to support this interpretation when he says that “(for Disraeli, and it would appear for Eliot as well, the term ‘Arab’ included the Jew)” (125). And he is not the only one since he is joined by Himmelfarb who expands a little more on this intriguing use of the term “Arab” and tells us that it “was commonly used to mean ‘Semitic,’ including Jews as well as Muslims and Christians” (88). For Mordecai, at this stage in the story, this linguistic oddity certainly did not cause any problem since he, too, obviously understood “Jew” when Deronda meant “Arab”.

It is worth reminding the reader that, in the whole novel, this is the only instance in which the word “Arab” was used by Eliot. And which Arabs did she mean then? Did she mean Jews as Semmel seems to suggest? Did she mean Christians as Himmelfarb’s footnote has it? Or did she have in mind those “Oriental peoples’ that Nurbhai and Newton cite in a quote from one of Eliot’s letters to convince Edward Said that “there is nothing [she] should care to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellows who most differ from them in customs and beliefs” (152)?

On the one hand, Eliot publicly dared at long last condemn British colonialism towards the end of her life when she wrote in Impressions of Theophrastus Such: “we are a small number of an alien race, profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people” (188); on the other, however, she continued to profit by

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\(^{11}\) Both William Baker and Gordon Haight point out the parallel between Mordecai and Emmanuel Deutsch. Haight notes that “memories of poor Deutsch are woven through her conception of the dying Mordecai” (GE: A Biography 471), while Baker describes him as “the probable model for Mordecai” (131). The biographical parallel with Maimonides is equally striking.
“the produce of these prejudiced people” till the end of her life from her transcontinental investments in colonial economy in Africa, Egypt, India, and even South America. As a colonial shareholder, mainly in colonial railways, Eliot was in fact sharing both in the expansion and the continuity of the British Empire — not in the independence or self-determination of those prejudiced people as she chose to call them. Nancy Henry did not miss this crucial point when she commented on a pro-colonial Westminster Review article from 1860: “Far from encouraging the cooperation and independence of the Indian people, railroads and British investment in them developed into a justification for continued British rule” (GE & TBE 101).

As Henry also acknowledges, Eliot’s “writing shows a decided avoidance of the realities of British colonialism” (GE & TBE 20). She chose, instead, to turn to fifteenth-century Spain where a holy war involved Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Gypsies, and wrote a romance in epic verse about the expulsion of the latter “around the time of the expulsion of the Jews in 1492” (245) as we are told by Lovesey who pointedly writes, using quotes from the poem: “The Moors have facilitated the Gypsies’ plan to escape exile in Africa, but ‘Moslem subtlety’ casts a calculating and wary eye upon the enterprise. The Moors speculate on whether there will be sufficient space for the Gypsies within, not Africa, but a Jewish, Christian, Moslem or Gypsy hell” (245-46). If such a stereotyped picture of the Arabs/Moslems has a familiar ring to it, it is unquestionably that of a seemingly puzzled Eliot who, while reviewing the reverend Davis’ Evenings in my Tent\(^1\), hesitated whether to still trust her childhood idealized picture of the “lofty, generous Arab … incapable of deceit or treachery” (330). In The Spanish Gypsy, however, she apparently wrote as if she had made up her mind as to what to believe about this Arab whose Tunisian land she unhesitatingly disposed of to provide safe exile for European Gypsies fleeing the cruel Spanish Catholic persecution. Ten years later, in her last novel Daniel Deronda, she definitely decided to avoid any mention of the presence of this same Arab in a land where he, too, does historically belong, along with Christians and Jews. And if there is one who seems to share the main argument developed in this discussion it is Lovesey, again, who writes: “Islam in George Eliot’s work is less sympathetically and far less extensively treated than Judaism” (246).

\(^1\) Here is the full quote from Eliot’s review of Davis’ Evenings in My Tent: “How little do we still know of Africa. In our childhood, its name exerted a mysterious power over our imaginations, dating from that terrible ‘African Magician’ of the Arabian Nights … In riper years, poetry and romance peopled this grand stage with fitting actors, — with the lofty, generous Arab, dwelling like a patriarch of old, in his goat-skin tent; scouring the sands on his matchless horse, yielding but to numbers, incapable of deceit or treachery. It must be owned that either the spell of the African magician still somewhat blinds our eyes, or these simple and noble sons of the Desert have degenerated strangely” (330).
Works Cited


