

"A definite outline for our ignorance": Italian Cultural Mediation in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

Andrew Thompson
University of Genoa

George Eliot's epigraph to Chapter 11 of *Daniel Deronda* reads: "The beginning of an acquaintance whether with persons or things is to get a definite outline for our ignorance" (1967: 145). In this paper I shall argue that, faced with the problem of portraying a Jewish culture essentially alien to most of her readers, George Eliot consistently associates her Jewish characters with Italy and Italian culture, about which the British were much better informed in the second half of the nineteenth century, so as to provide at least an "outline for [their] ignorance". Eliot incorporates musical settings of texts by Dante and Leopardi and assimilates *Risorgimento* myths and iconography into her novel, and these all tend to show the Jews in a positive light by comparison with the *English* society of *Daniel Deronda*. The mythology and cultural productions of nineteenth-century Italian nationalism have the function of familiarising and making the novel's Jewish society respectable, and also work as analogues which take on a predictive force for Jewish national aspirations within the novel.

I shall examine three elements in what I regard as a sustained hermeneutic strategy whereby the Jewish part of the novel is often mediated through Italian cultural references. First, I consider the use Eliot makes of texts by Leopardi and Dante; then I look at the novel in relation to the figure of Giuseppe Mazzini; and finally I examine *Daniel Deronda* as the locus of a conflict between the aggressive nationalism and arrogant imperialism which Eliot saw emerging in Britain and Europe in the 1870s and her own moral vision of a Jewish nationalism, one for which she presents the Italian experience (or at least British perceptions of it) as paradigmatic.

"Utter the name of Leopardi before any Italian, and he instantly bursts forth with,— O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi / E le colonne e i simulacri e l'ermo / Torri degli avi nostri, [...]". Thus George Henry Lewes in *Frazer's Magazine* in what was the article which introduced the then unknown Leopardi to British readers (1848: 661). Lewes, himself very much at the centre of support for the Italian cause in England (by publishing Mazzini's writings and helping raise funds) was of course to become George Eliot's lifelong companion just over four years later. In his article, Lewes asserted that "from Dante downwards, there have been no more piercing, manly, vigorous strains, than those which vibrate in the organ-peal of patriotism sent forth by Leopardi." Writing twenty-five years later, well after the Unification of Italy, which was defined by one historian as

"the most striking of the successes of nineteenth-century nationalism" (Beales 1961: 11), George Eliot tried to harness the energies vibrating in that organ-peal of patriotism to Daniel Deronda's Zionism.

Eliot quotes directly (in Italian) from Leopardi's *All'Italia* twice in *Daniel Deronda*. On both occasions, it is Mirah who sings a setting of the Ode by a fictitious nineteenth-century composer Joseph Leo. On the first occasion the young Jewish girl, Mirah, is auditioning for singing lessons before the musician/pianist Klesmer. Eliot quotes selectively from the 140 line poem, dramatising her text by providing musical indications of tempo and mood to guide the reader through the musical experience and to heighten it as Lewes had done in his article:

"O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi
e le colonne e i simulacri e l'orme
torri degli avi nostri" -

This was recitative: then followed-

"Ma la gloria non vedo" -

a mournful melody, a rhythmic plaint. After this came a climax of devout triumph - passing from the subdued adoration of a happy Andante in the words -

"Beatissimi voi,
Che offriste il petto alle nemiche lance
Per amor di costei che al sol vi diede" -

to the joyous outburst of an exultant Allegro in -

"Oh viva, oh viva:
Beatissimi voi
Mentre nel mondo si favelli o scriva." (540-541)

Eliot, like Lewes, emphasises those aspects of the poem which make it a cry of despair in the present set against the idealised past of *Italia*. The fictitious Joseph Leo's setting exalts those who have died for love of, or in defence of, "La patria". However, the hope for a "rebirth" (or "resurgence") is not evident here: past glory remains firmly *past*.

Yet Mirah sings "O patria mia" twice, and on the second occasion, to the mind of Daniel who is listening, the text is experienced differently.

Daniel [...] knew well Leopardi's fine Ode to Italy (when Italy sat like a disconsolate mother in chains, hiding her face on her knees and weeping), and the few selected words were filled for him with the grandeur of the

whole, which seemed to breathe an inspiration through the music. [...] Certain words not included in the song nevertheless rang within Deronda as harmonies from one invisible-

"Non ti difende
Nessun de' tuoi? L'armi, qua l'armi: io solo
Combatterò, procomberò sol io" -

they seemed the very voice of that heroic passion which is falsely said to devote itself in vain when it achieves the godlike end of manifesting unselfish love." (619-620)¹

Daniel, like so many of his generation, is familiar with the recent history of Italy "when [she] sat like a disconsolate mother in chains, hiding her face on her knees and weeping) [...]" and in the present of the novel the "prophecy" of Unification had all but been fulfilled. The focus in Daniel's experience of the musical setting, for which he supplies the Italian *context*, is on "battle" and the need to take part in some great enterprise. The first time we hear Leopardi's Ode, it is a poem of despair which praises the fallen for the great and noble cause, the second it becomes a call to arms. Mirah is the vehicle for this "awakening" in Daniel, and the whole experience depends upon, and is articulated through, the language of the Italian *Risorgimento*. Leopardi's Ode here takes on a predictive quality, for it is a presentiment of the forces which will have claimed Daniel by the end of the novel – those of hope for, and belief in, the possibility of national revival.

It is not perhaps immediately evident to British readers that the words "(when Italy sat like a disconsolate mother in chains, hiding her face on her knees and weeping)" are in fact a close paraphrase of the actual words of Leopardi's Ode:

"E questo è peggio,
che di catene ha carche ambe le braccia;
sì che sparte le chiome e senza velo
siede in terra negletta e sconsolata,
nascondendo la faccia
tra le ginocchia, e piange. (12-17)

Four hundred pages earlier in *Daniel Deronda* is the scene by the river when Daniel rescues Mirah who, in her despair, is about to commit suicide. When he first notices her "her eyes were fixed on the river with a look of immovable,

1 Eliot provides an English translation of these lines as a footnote in her text: "Do none of thy children defend thee? Arms! Bring me Arms! alone I will fight, alone I will fall."

statue-like despair" (227). He rows on, but when he returns back along the river, Mirah has wet her cloak to use as a "drowning-shroud". "[She] sank down on the brink again, holding her cloak but half out of the water. She crouched and covered her face [...]" (230). For an instant, Eliot creates a Leopardian tableau of suicidal despair in which Mirah, her arms weighed down by the sodden cloak, herself appears a "disconsolate mother in chains, hiding her face on her knees and weeping". Her "statuesque despair" puts one in mind too of the "simulacri" of Leopardi's ode and indeed the whole literary tradition of imaging the past greatness of Italy.

It may be remembered that in *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen enacts a tableau of Hermione from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* in which, instead of coming to life, Gwendolen freezes with fear as a wooden panel falls open. In this Leopardian tableau by the river bank, we have a scene which acts a kind of negative image of the Gwendolen/Hermione one. Mirah's infernal condition of despair and complete loss of hope enables her to receive a voice from another world, for while rowing along the river Daniel has been singing words from Dante's *Inferno* V set to music by Rossini in *Otello*:

"Nessun maggior dolor
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria:" (227)

But the voice is also from *this* world, and its effect is to animate the statue:

[...] his voice had entered her inner world [...], for when it suddenly ceased she changed her attitude slightly, and, looking round with a frightened glance, met Deronda's face (227).

Ironically, Gwendolen's Hermione refuses to come to life, and Dante's words from "tra la perduta gente" have the power to awaken Mirah from her statuesque despair. Mirah repeats the words

I saw you before; [...] "nella miseria". [...] "It was you singing?" she went on, hesitatingly – "Nessun maggior dolore." . . .
[...]
"I cannot see how I shall be glad to live. The *maggior dolore* and the *miseria* have lasted longer than the *tempo felice*." She paused and then went on dreamily, – "*Dolore – miseria* – I think those words are alive."
(230-233)

Those words are indeed alive. They neatly summarise the pre-Risorgimento condition of Italy itself in which Italians could only look back on a "tempo felice" in present "miseria", and at the same time they give voice to Mirah's own personal suffering and to that of her people. Still unaware of his origins, Daniel

has already acted out the drama of saving a Leopardian *Italia* in his rescue of Mirah in a kind of premonition of what his mission is to be. And this occurs well before he receives his Leopardian call to arms, in the words "Non ti difende / Nessun de' tuoi?" The yearning for an idyllic past in present despair, the search for the lost mother, the attempts to trace the family and the call to arms are all mediated through the language and the terms of the Italian *Risorgimento* in the passages I have examined. The energies embodied in these texts reach out and claim both Daniel and Mirah and place them in relation to a living *Risorgimento* tradition. The body of literary allusion upon which Eliot draws is, as Adrian Poole puts it, "a kind of remembering" which "urge[s] on characters and readers alike the need to [...] respect the warnings and demands of the past, to absorb the succour and admonition of its precedents" (Poole 1983: 294).

A further aspect of this "remembering" in *Daniel Deronda* has to do with another *Risorgimento* figure, Giuseppe Mazzini, who Eliot admired and supported. As editor of the *Westminster Review*, she read and published his article *Europe: its Condition and Prospects* in 1852, and in 1865 she wrote: "Mr Lewes and I have a real reverence for Mazzini" (Haight 1956a: 200). On the Italian's death in 1872 she wrote to one of Mazzini's closest supporters in England that "Such a man leaves behind him a wider good than the loss of his personal presence can take away. [...] I enter thoroughly into your sense of wealth in having known him" (Haight 1956b: 173). This support drew heavy criticism from Lord Acton (who worked with Eliot's husband John Cross on the first biography of Eliot). "Her tolerance for Mazzini" he said was "a criminal matter, independent of the laws of states and churches, which no variety of theological opinion can by any means affect" (Paul 1906: 326).

Eliot and Lewes' hero was clearly not the Mazzini who was known as the raiser of insurrection, nor the diabolical cloak-and-dagger revolutionary despised by Acton and others, but rather the thinker, "visionary" and "prophet" of pro-Mazzini propaganda and of English liberal-intellectual perceptions of events in Italy. This admiration permeates wherever Mazzini is mentioned in Eliot's writings, though she consistently depoliticises him, divorcing him from any concrete political context and talking of "struggle" in purely abstract terms.²

2 Other examples are in Eliot's review of Margaret Fuller's Letters from Italy in the *Westminster* (1856: 271): "It is very interesting to read the warm testimony which a close observer like Margaret Fuller bears to the noble conduct of Mazzini, both in the days of revolutionary triumph and of revolutionary tribulation"; and in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!", "the pathos of his country's lot pierced the youthful soul of Mazzini, because, like Dante's, his blood was fraught with the kinship of Italian greatness, his imagination filled with a majestic past that wrought itself into a majestic future." (Eliot 1901: 169)

There are, I think, a number of broad correspondences between the eponymous hero of *Daniel Deronda* and Mazzini, which might lead one to believe that Deronda was in part inspired by, if not actually modelled on, the Italian revolutionary. Daniel is himself repeatedly associated with Italian culture and its productions. He sings Rossini's Dante and, in a conflation of two lines from *Inferno IV* he is described as having the "occhi tardi e gravi" of the "spiriti magni" (500). He puts people in mind of Italian portraits and Eliot explicitly likens him to portraits by Titian (226). His earlier education has included reading the historian Simonde de Sismondi (also an important figure for the young Mazzini) who helps Daniel nurture a passion for "universal history, which made him want to be at home in foreign countries" (p. 220). But Deronda has clearly read, and been inspired by Mazzini too. In Chapter 42 he says

Look into Mazzini's account of his first yearning, when he was a boy, after a restored greatness and a new freedom to Italy, and of his first efforts as a young man to rouse the same feelings in other young men, and get them to work towards a united nationality. (595)

Daniel refers to a specific text here. It is, in fact, Mazzini's 1861 account of the famous "proscritti d'Italia" episode in which, after a chance encounter with the "tall black-bearded man, with a severe countenance and fiery glance" in Strada Nuova in Genoa, Mazzini receives his mission as, haunted by the memory of that face, he began to realise that "Italians *could* and therefore *ought* to struggle" for liberty (Mazzini 1870: 2). *Daniel Deronda* too is full of chance meetings and coincidences and there is something of that same prophetic momentousness in Daniel's first highly charged meeting with Mordecai, who is himself associated with the great Risorgimento prophet of Italy, Dante.³ Mordecai's figure is also "startling in its unusualness", a "strange [...] blend of the unwonted with the common". There is an uncanny moment of recognition when, as their eyes meet, the idea of some "prophet of the Exile, or [...] some New Hebrew poet of the medieval time" flashes across Daniel's mind. As in Mazzini's account of *his*

3 Like Dante, the "Father of Italy", Mordecai is imaged as visionary who transmits his own poetry to future generations ("My words may rule him some day. [...] It is so with a nation - after many days" (533)). He, too, is a "father", for his passionate vision "is something more than a grandiose transfiguration of the parental love that toils, renounces, resists the suicidal promptings of despair - all because of the little ones, whose future becomes present to the yearning gaze of anxiety" (593). He is also explicitly linked to Dante, when Daniel furnishes lodgings for him with "bas-reliefs of Milton and Dante" (606); Cortese (1981: 17-18) suggests Dante's *Purgatorio XVII*, 29-30, which Eliot knew particularly well, as a possible source in Dante for Mordecai: "the just Mordecai who was in speech and deed so blameless."

experience, Daniel is haunted by the memory of this meeting and Mordecai's figure comes to "[bite] itself into Deronda's mind as a new question" (528).

Daniel receives *his* mission when he meets his mother, the singer Alchirisi, in Genoa and learns his true identity. While in Genoa he considers his new circumstances:

[The] young energy and spirit of adventure which have helped to create the world-wide legends of youthful heroes going to seek the hidden tokens of their birth and its inheritance of tasks, gave him a certain quivering interest in the bare possibility that he was entering on a like track – all the more because the track was one of thought as well as action. (573-574)

This generalised account of going forth to seek "the hidden tokens of [...] birth and its inheritance of tasks" parallels the specific Mazzinian subtext to which Daniel refers – there is even an echo of Mazzini's slogan "pensiero ed azione" in Daniel's speculation that his "track [might be] one of thought as well as action." Genoa then becomes for Daniel, as it had been for Mazzini, a starting point, a place charged with possibilities, where old categories and identities are broken down and new ones established. There is, I believe, a tribute to Mazzini intended in Eliot's placing of the defining event in Daniel's life in *Genoa*, the birthplace of the "prophet of Italy". "Almost everything seemed against [Mazzini]:" says Daniel: "his countrymen were ignorant or indifferent, governments hostile, Europe incredulous. Of course the scorners often seemed wise. Yet you see the prophecy lay with him" (595). And Eliot of course intends that, by association with the name of Mazzini, Daniel's own Zionist project should appear more credible. As with the rescue of Mirah by the river, we have an allusion to and echoes of a significant piece of Risorgimento mythology, the "proscritti d'Italia" episode, and one with resonances for British readers, many of whom had followed the "Italian question" with great interest or even passion since the 1850s, and whose sympathies might therefore be engaged for Daniel via the emotionally charged Italian experience. Daniel takes up his mission at the place where Mazzini's may be said to have begun and at a time, 1866, when, as Daniel remarks, "we are sure soon to see [the unity of Italy] accomplished to the very last boundary" (595). The clue which George Eliot gives us in her passing reference to the text by Mazzini allows us access to another of the many "hidden affinities" in *Daniel Deronda*.

In the opening scene of the novel we are presented with various European types absorbed in play round a gaming table. One of these is "a handsome Italian, calm, statuesque" constantly losing piles of Napoleons to "an old bewigged woman with eye glasses pinching her nose" who acknowledges her winnings with "a faint mumbling smile" while "the statuesque Italian remained

impassive." On one level, we have a representation of the pre-Risorgimento condition of Italy, being plundered and exploited and powerless to react. The gaming table also becomes an infernal battleground where isolated players, with "bony yellow crab-like hands" and countenances which seem only "a slight metamorphosis of the vulture" are "compelled [...] to the same narrow monotony of action" and opponents are enemies to be conquered and bled dry. This vignette (and it reminds one in some ways of political cartoons of the time from *Punch*)⁴ evokes the Italy of the pre-Risorgimento years, but is also a dark representation of the Europe of the late 1860s and early 70s, and it sets the tone for the story which develops in a medium that is constantly being intruded on by reminders of a harsh British and European militarism: Nesslerode, the Russian soldier and diplomat is mentioned; a "discussion of military manoeuvres" involving a clergyman is interrupted; "the late Teutonic conquests" of Bismark are mentioned; the narrator comments that "The time-honoured British resource of 'killing something' is no longer carried on with bow and quiver; [...] Archery has no ugly smell of brimstone; breaks nobody's shins"; and again the narrator denounces the "correct Englishman, drawing himself up from his bow into rigidity, assenting severely, and seeming to be in a state of internal drill". The Gwendolen/Grandcourt relationship too is characterised in terms of empire and subjection. Gwendolen "was going to have indefinite power" over her husband, who would "declare himself [her] slave"; Grandcourt's courtship of Gwendolen is a "war policy", a "campaign" and, as the images become increasingly violent, he "require[s] [...] that she should be as fully aware as she would have been of a locked hand-cuff, that her inclination was helpless to decide anything in contradiction with his resolve" (465), and he gains "an intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive" while enjoying "the piquancy of despotism". William Myers sees Grandcourt as the embodiment of a spirit of brutal faithlessness, based on political agnosticism and a will to violence, which, in the 1870s he says was "a new and virulent threat to the humanism on which [Eliot] based her life." In Grandcourt, "perfect gentlemanly detachment is in secret alliance with 'Blood and Iron'" (Myers 1984: 214) Grandcourt's "perfect gentlemanly detachment" is also in alliance with British colonialism, as Eliot's scathing remark that he would be fit to be the ruthless governor of a difficult colony shows.

Against all of this is set the rather more optimistic historical movement traced in the Italian material in the novel. We begin with abject subjection in the novel's opening and in the texts from Dante and Leopardi. Then there is Daniel's

4 A political cartoon "The Rub" (*Punch*, 27 October, 1860) shows a statuesque Italia looking on while her fate is decided over a game of cards between Pope Pius IX, Victor Emmanuel, Ferdinand of Naples and Garibaldi. The cartoon is reproduced in Morrogh (1991: 97).

affirmation that "we are sure soon to see [the unity of Italy] accomplished to the very last boundary" (595), in which Daniel's nationalist discourse reproduces the Risorgimento idea – stretching back to Dante – that there *were* "natural" boundaries and thereby stands against the expansionist discourses of nationalism. We then move through Daniel's own Leopardian call to arms (619-620) to the urgency of the following in the present of the novel in 1866:

"What on earth is the wonderful news?" said Mrs Meyrick [...] "Anything about the Austrians giving up Venice?"

"Nothing about Italy, but something from Italy," said Hans, with a peculiarity in his tone and manner which set his mother interpreting.

"What is it that has happened?"

[...]

"[Grandcourt] is drowned, and [Gwendolen] is alive, that's all," said Hans [...] (793-794)

Eliot nicely juxtaposes the two sets of events here, to make the point about release from oppression at both personal and national levels by linking the news of Gwendolen's release from the despotic Grandcourt – which also takes place in Genoa – to the struggles of the new nation to complete its liberation. And readers of *Daniel Deronda* in 1876 and after would of course have the certainty that the Italian prophecy had indeed been fulfilled, with the inclusion of Venice in 1866 and then Rome in 1870.

In the midst of Eliot's darker vision, and in the face of militarism and an arrogant expansionism, the Italian material generates hope for Daniel's project of restoring a political existence to his people in which there will be "separateness with communication" rather than the isolationism inherent in the discourses of European and British nationalism. Picking up on this Italian theme in a review in 1876, a sympathetic reviewer puts it succinctly:

The transformation of [...] Deronda, [and his] readiness [...] to undertake a national mission of the most improbable realisation, only proves an amount of belief in possibilities which all great men who have achieved difficult enterprises must have shared. The unity of Italy half a century since appeared as idle a dream as may now seem the reassembling of Israel in its own kingdom. Garibaldi and Mazzini were regarded as fanatics and visionaries, yet the leader of the thousand of Marsala has sat in the Parliament of United Italy which holds its meetings in the Eternal City."⁵

5 James Picciotto in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, November 1876, xvii, pp.593-603, cit. Carroll (1971: 410).

Daniel Deronda then is the locus of a conflict between, on the one hand, the aggressive nationalism and arrogant imperialism which Eliot saw emerging in Britain and Europe in the 1870s and, on the other, a moral humanist, though essentially depoliticised, vision of the possibility of a Jewish nationalism, which is born in *Deronda* by the end of the novel.

In her extensive use of Italian material in *Daniel Deronda*, then, Eliot employs a deliberate and carefully calculated hermeneutic strategy so as to provide "a definite outline for our ignorance." She hoped to circumvent British prejudices concerning Jews, to make them respectable in the same way as Italians had become; she translates the yearning for a national identity in this unknown people into the language and terms of the Italian *Risorgimento*, and incorporates an account of Italian nationalism and Unification both as a way of increasing the plausibility of *Deronda's* Zionist project, and as an alternative model to set against the aggressive European and British nationalisms of the 1870s.

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