

Nascent consciousnesses, unaccountable conjunctions: Emergent Agency in Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

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During the nineteenth century there was an increasing concern with both the physical conditions of our mental capacities and the motivational channels that lead from the ones to the others and back again. This essay analyses, first, how these generative processes are modelled and described in Herbert Spencer's evolutionary psychology. It shows, second, how Daniel Deronda may be seen to engage with Spencer's account, supplementing it by a non-reductive representation of human agency that becomes embodied in the title character. As Deronda learns to regard himself as Jewish without ceasing to be English, it is argued, he comes to exemplify an emergent form of identity that structurally reproduces itself in the two-part interaction of the very text that represents it.

I

Human actions, as John Searle (1984: 57-70) describes them, have both a physical and a mental component. The physical component is the movement that becomes manifest in different parts of the body when someone is engaged in doing something, while the mental component consists of what Searle calls the intentions or intentional states that cause the different parts of the body to move in a way that, at the same time, is represented by these intentional states. Whenever I wave my arm, shake my head or write an article, I do so because I act with a particular intention in mind that determines not only the way I describe the action – one and the same action can be described in many different ways – but also the “conditions of satisfaction” by which I judge whether an action is successful or not (1984: 61). The intention someone acts with, then, is crucial for any understanding of the notion and structure of agency, and there are two reasons why this should be so. First, it is this intention or intentional state that defines both the content and the mode of a mental disposition (1984: 60). It defines both *what* is represented in the mind of an agent (‘writing an article’) and *how* it is represented there (as a desire, a belief, a plan), which means, for example, that, if the mental content is ‘writing an article,’ the mode is what specifies whether someone wants to write an article, or believes that he is writing an article or plans to be writing an article. Second, the intention is also what links the mental component of the action to its physical realisation. It is what motivates someone to behave in a particular way because it relates an abstract psychological state to a concrete movement of the body either by a process of practical reasoning that precedes the action or by a self-evident understanding that is operative in the process of it, a tacit, unquestioned belief that here, right now, I am engaged, say, in writing an article or waving my arm.

Yet, as simple and elegant as it is, this model suffers from at least one weakness. Although Searle acknowledges that each intention is always related to an intricate network of other intentions, his account can only capture the relation between particular intentions and their corresponding acts, but it can neither explain how these intentions are brought about in the first place nor how they change in response to differing circumstances. Consequently, all the opinions, habits, hopes, moods, skills, abilities and feelings that constitute such complex

concepts as selfhood, character or personality and may characteristically show themselves in specific processes of intentional agency are shifted out of the descriptive focus and feature only as a vague background of capacities and beliefs that, albeit requisite for each mental state to be formed in the first place, are “*not themselves mental states*” (1984: 68).

In what follows, I wish to look somewhat more closely at this evasive background of subjective agency: the necessary and yet rather inchoate set of implicit conditions and beliefs that we always readily draw on in our choices and movements, but only rarely become aware of as an influential and decisive factor in the way we perform our actions. Rather than continuing to deal with this theme in the general way that I have introduced it, however, I hope to give some historical substance to it by tracing two of its manifestations in nineteenth century thought and literature, namely in Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* (1855) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Regarding the background conditions of human actions, I believe, the Victorian period is an especially interesting one to look at because, in the wake of evolutionary theory, there was an increasing concern with precisely these tacit presuppositions and unconscious grounds of our conscious mental states or, rather, with the loss and lack thereof. As it is well known, one of the most outstanding effects of Lyell's and Darwin's findings was that they profoundly unsettled and upset any sense of reliable origins and unbroken descent. Instead, the record of human history was not only discovered to extend enormously far back into a vast recess of long forgotten ages, but it was also revealed to be imperfect and ruptured, marked by signs of extinction, forgotten options, and paths never taken. Even though each species as it presently exists may have gradually evolved out of a long succession of predecessor forms, we cannot, as Darwin (1859) clearly saw, expect our geological record to retain traces of each transitional stage within this prodigal, meandering course. In fact, he writes, we must even suppose that there were innumerable generations that we have not the slightest knowledge of and “that the number both of specimens and of species, preserved in our museums, is absolutely as nothing compared with the incalculable number of generations which must have passed away even during a single formation” (1964: 342). The remnants of life's actual past invariably resonate with a plethora of other, possible pasts because at any moment of the earth's natural history there has always been more than one possible trajectory. The world and everything within it could just as well have evolved differently or not at all. Hence the incalculable lost numbers Darwin speaks of are still an integral, though negative, part of our natural history; therefore any narrative account of this history had to face the problem, as Gilian Beer puts it, “of how to sustain a narrative form that would satisfy the demand for coherence while acknowledging evanescence” (1986: 72).

Among other issues, this evolutionary view of life contributed to an increasing disenchantment of mankind as well as to a radical uprooting of the spiritual and transcendental grounds of human agency that entailed a number of new questions such as: What physical factors shape and influence the gradual development of mental abilities, and how do these, in turn, impinge on the life and constitution of the body? How do we become conscious of our bodily actions if consciousness is itself nothing but an embodied fact? How can we explain the cultural capacity of the intellect to distance and distinguish itself from the natural conditions that enable and surround it? Is this capacity of self-distinction and self-identification something specifically human, and where, if at all, can we locate this quality of the specifically human within the nebulous vicissitudes of variation and selection that evolutionists like Darwin placed at the centre of all organic life? In the nineteenth century, as today, there was anything but a consensus on how these questions should be answered.

Indeed, one of the most disturbing effects of the biological conception of history was that it seemed to deprive the human race of anything like a specific quality that might set it apart from the other varieties of life. Instead, even such apparently distinctive features of the human as consciousness, volition, memory, emotion and moral awareness were predominantly explained within the paradigm of general biology, and, as a result, even the mental conditions of subjective agency were reduced to the same categorial level as reflex actions, survival instincts and physiological mechanisms (cf. Rylance 2000: 70-109, 203-50; Davies 2006, 11-45). “Psychology,” as Herbert Spencer has it, was to be seen first and foremost “as a division of natural history” (1966 I: 243).

II

According to Spencer, whose *Principles of Psychology* were published in 1855, even before Darwin’s *Origin*, this implies an important shift of perspective because such a “natural history of the mind” (Spencer 1966: 257) had to move considerably beyond a merely descriptive account of the separate faculties that were traditionally supposed to make up the mind. Instead, it had to decompose these different faculties into their elementary, physical units in order to make them accountable as the historical products of a dynamic process of constitution that successively works itself upwards from a simple state of homogeneity to an ever more complex state of heterogeneity. It is important, however, that Spencer does not describe this development as contingent or arbitrary, but adds a directional element to it. He conceives it to be governed by a tendency towards co-ordination among the activities of the heterogeneous parts emerging from it, which ensures that the evolutionary process does not result in a disorderly mess of particulars, but in an increasingly better integrated form of organic unity. What is more, this propensity of each organism to arrange the actions of its different parts into a single whole is motivated by the very movement that Spencer chooses as his definition of life: the “continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations” (1910 I: 293).

While the point of this argument may not be immediately evident, there is a simple rationale behind it which deserves to be highlighted: The more internally unified an organism becomes, the better it can adapt to its environment; and the better it can adapt to its environment, the more easily it can stay alive. Obviously, then, the disposition of life as Spencer understands it is twofold. On the one hand, it presupposes a division of the internal and the external, the inner and the outer, the psychological and the physical; on the other hand, it is guided by the incentive to overcome this division and replace it by a relationship of correspondence and fit. Life, one might say, is nothing but a perpetual endeavour to repair a self-created breach. And what is particularly notable about this concept, is that neither the disunion nor the correspondence are simply absolute or given. Both only become apparent in the natural course of evolution, so that dissociation and harmony, “differentiation and integration” (1910 I: 387, *passim*) turn out to be two aspects of the same gradual process of change. In abstract terms this may be summed up as follows: Each development starts with a distinction that separates one unit from its environment. As a response, the distinguished unit generates further distinctions within itself which enable the several parts so produced to relate to each other and form an organic alliance among themselves that closes them off even more markedly from the space outside of them. The point is, though, that this process of unification and closure does not so much cut off the organism from its environment, but provides it with

the capacity to relate and respond to it in an increasingly intelligent way. Consequently, intelligence, as Spencer defines it, resides in nothing else but “conformity of the inner to the outer order” (1910 I: 410). When a moth flies at a candle flame and dies, this is simply due to a lack of internal integration that equals a want of ability to adjust its physical actions in an intelligent way to its surroundings. In Spencer’s terms, it demonstrates a failure “of the internal order to parallel the external order” (1910 I: 409). In Searle’s terms, we could also say that the moth lacks the competence to form an intention by means of which it could organise the relationship of the mental and the physical component of its actions in a better adapted and thus beneficial, life-enhancing way.

Coming back to the quality of the human within evolutionary psychology, it should have become clear by now where Spencer locates it, namely in a comparably advanced skill to co-ordinate the mental and the physical order of life. More precisely, what sets the behaviour of humans apart from that of animals is the capacity of the former to translate the life of the body into a different, mental make-up that qualifies the organism as a whole to frame its activities in correspondence with the world beyond the activities so framed. This point is much subtler than it may seem, since it suggests that the duality between the mental and the physical is a by-product of each organism’s natural inclination to move towards ever more sophisticated modes of agreement between itself and its contexts. In other words, the drawing asunder of the two great orders of human life is a prerequisite for their increasingly more effective co-ordination. The gap between the mental and the physical, paradoxically, builds up in proportion with the faculty to join them together. Again, it must be clearly understood that this is anything but a dualistic conception. On the contrary, Spencer repeatedly emphasises that the “two great classes of vital actions” (1910 I: 395) that constitute the mental and the physical domain of life respectively cannot be distinguished in essential or absolute terms, but only by their operational layout. He describes this difference as follows: Whereas the activities of physical life, “digestion, circulation, respiration, excretion, secretion, &c., in all their many sub-divisions,” are arranged both simultaneously and successively, the events of the psyche, “the actions constituting thought occur, not together, but one after another,” in concatenations of a successive kind (1910 I: 395).

Following this description, the relationship of mind and body can be mapped out in terms of two levels of operation within the same physical order. In addition, it suggests that the activities of these two levels do not mutually exclude each other, but usually keep running at the same time, even though they do so in different modes. Given this modal difference, the co-ordination of the mental and the physical that is necessary for the living body to adapt to its environment in an intelligent way may effectively be described as a transaction of selection and combination by which the simultaneity of physical life, as it is initially stimulated by sensual perception, is mentally processed in terms of a serial order. In this way, the organism can make its physical movements conform to a chain of mental states, and, as I have mentioned, it is exactly this conformity of the inner and the outer that Spencer takes to be characteristic of intelligent agency. Having said this, however, it should also be emphasised that due to the assumption of a physical continuity between the internal and the external, this process of selection, or the tendency towards the serial form, cannot, of course, be the exclusive property of the mental sphere. Instead, it is already initiated on the outside of the body, which means that the skin, “being the part immediately subject to the various kinds of external stimuli, necessarily becomes the part in which psychical changes are originated” (1910 I: 400-401).

Following up on this point, Spencer sketches a very detailed history of how organisms have come to develop an ever more refined apparatus on the surface of their skins by means of which “the raw material of intelligence” is converted into manageable portions (1910 I: 401). As for human beings, the most prominent feature of this apparatus are the organs of the five special senses, each of which functions as an elaborate filtering instance, ensuring that the mass of impressions simultaneously swarming in on our bodies are always already perceived in a concentrated, purified form that allows us to interpret them as a series of informational units. In Spencer’s words:

Continued differentiation and integration, thus concentrating the actions out of which psychical life is evolved, first on the surface of the organism, afterwards on certain regions of that surface, afterwards on those specialized parts of it constituting the organs of the higher senses, and finally in minute parts of these parts, necessarily render the psychical life more and more distinct from the physical life by bringing its changes more and more into serial order. (1910 I: 402)

In sum, the evolution of an increasingly more integrated and thus better adaptable psyche may also be expressed as the transformation of an indistinct order of simultaneity into a distinct order of seriality. The advancement of the capacity to adjust the mental to the physical is identical with the advancement of the capacity to handle an innumerable amount of separate bodily sensations in terms of a syntactical chain of cognitive meaning by passing them, one after another, through a “common centre of communication” (1910 I: 403). By the same logic, even the development of consciousness is only an aspect of the progression towards ever more exact mind-body correspondences since consciousness, in Spencer’s terms, is nothing but the subjective face of a linear series of psychical changes.

Objectively seen, however, it necessarily follows that consciousness can only be a highly selective extrapolation of events that will never represent the whole array of physical sensations that, at any time, we are subject to. What, in terms of subjective introspection, we cognitively perceive to be a single sequence of events can only be, in terms of objective physiology, a very partial arrangement. It is, quite literally, a matter of fact that nothing we may be intelligently conscious of can include the full picture because, any time we are conscious of something, there are “constantly being performed actions of an intelligent kind which are not present to consciousness” (1910 I: 404). Due to the “many gradations between completely-conscious actions and completely-unconscious ones,” in other words, we have to assume that, on another, deeper, more empirical level of perception, our thoughts are always accompanied by further possible thoughts that have not been selected to become part of the thin, linear thread of mindful thinking. Hence, even though we may mentally realise each visual impression as a single state, it is “in reality” made up of a complex of sundry sensations, and beyond the particular object we look at, our consciousness gradually peters out into a multifarious melee of phenomena we are only dimly and indefinitely aware of (1910 I: 404). For Spencer, this is as obvious as it is “perplexing” because it remains anything but clear in what respect these collateral half-conscious and non-conscious sense-bits can be seen as part of a successive order of changing mental states (1910 I: 404). Strictly speaking, in fact, the thing we are actually conscious of at any instant cannot at the same time be said to mark the boundaries of consciousness, since it is only a matter of attention and belief what exactly is knitted into the serial ribbon that constitutes the wary mind. During each state of perception, it seems, our consciousness is surrounded by a many-shaded silhouette of potential or “nascent consciousnesses,” and it is “only by a certain licence” that we can speak

of single conscious states. Even the coherent logic of rational thought forms at best a “seemingly-single succession of states” (1910 I: 404, 406).

To be sure, Spencer takes considerable pain not to awake these ghostly paraphernalia of identity. On the contrary, the emphasis of his epistemology remains firmly with the mind’s chief power to cleanse the irritating multiplicity of simultaneous influences from everything that might distract, derange or radically re-direct “the closely-twisted series of changes” forming the centre of consciousness (1910 I: 406). This is consistent with the directional, progressive bent of Spencer’s evolutionary psychology, which, as several commentators have remarked, is more indebted to a Lamarckian than to a Darwinian framework (Freeman 1974; Rylance 2000: 223-226; Smith 1982). Indeed, even though he dispenses with any attempt to understand the workings of the human mind in terms of inherent properties, faculties or *a priori* conditions, the psychic activities as Spencer describes them are still premised on a teleological motivation that naturally propels every organism towards a unified structure and thus qualifies it to establish subtler and subtler correspondences with its environment. The goal of the mind’s continued differentiation is its internal identity. Moreover, although human perception remains continuously liable to diverting influences from outside, these will, to all intents and purposes, either be absorbed by the linear channel of consciousness or be expelled from it. In brief, then, Spencer’s natural history of the human mind goes like this: With their increasing capacity to adjust to the external world, human beings have, by trial and error, gradually come to develop a stable system of beliefs and habits that enables them to group all perceptions among pre-fabricated clusters of similar ones (cf. Rylance 2000: 240-50). These provide them with a principle of selection by means of which the impressionistic manifold of perception can be combined into an intentional line-up that serves to guide their physical actions in an intelligent way.

It is not difficult to see that this history of differentiation and integration necessarily tends to reduce human identity to an effect of biological life. Hence everything that may have contributed to the formation of subjectivity but cannot be explained by the organism’s tendency to perfect its integrative capacity is systematically factored out of the picture and figures only as a hazy league of half-real possibilities, a spectral set of “nascent consciousnesses,” ultimately silenced by the mainstream of mental changes. In the long run, however, this mainstream of consciousness can only maintain its integrity if it is held together by a subject who believes that it is *his* or *her* self that is defined by it (cf. Perry 1979; Altieri 1994: 27-57). As soon as this subject can no longer realise his or her identity in and by what it is conscious of, all the nascent sensations re-enter the thought current and threaten to dissolve its linear stability into a fragmentary puzzle of simultaneous possibilities that cancel each other out. Negatively seen, this seriously affects the readiness to act in a consistent, linear way. Positively seen, it opens up a kaleidoscopic field of options, a counterfactual space of exercise and experimentation that may yield the chance for a radical re-writing of the mind’s intentional history and the emergence of new paths for self-identification and future actions. Both aspects are amply explored in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*.

III

One notable example to start with is the well-known passage dealing with the “chief epoch” (Eliot 1998: 139), the turning point where Daniel for the first time finds himself doubting the congruity of the historical line of self-knowledge that had guided his actions thus far. Daniel,

the apparent nephew of Sir Hugo, is lying in the grass, reading, ironically, in a history book, when, “suddenly” his mental activity is obstructed by a stubborn piece of information that is not directly assimilated to the cardinal narrative of his consciousness, but makes itself felt as a cause of irritation. The intentional unity of the mental and the physical breaks apart, Daniel’s activity comes to a halt, “he let down his arm,” turns to his tutor and, “in purest boyish tones,” comes out with a question: “Mr Fraser, how was it that the popes and cardinals always had so many nephews?” (1998: 139). The answer is made in a “doubly telling” Scottish chant: “Their own children were called nephews,” says his tutor, adding that they “were illegitimate” (1998: 139). Although Daniel had once been told that his father and mother were no longer alive, this short glimpse into another world had never really entered the inner circle of his conscious mind, which had always been strongly dominated by Sir Hugo Mallinger and his place, “one of the finest in England, at once historical and romantic and home-like: a picturesque architectural outgrowth from an abbey, which had still remnants of the old monastic trunk” (1998: 140). Daniel, in short, had never seriously called into doubt that this haven of stability and security was his natural home. In the discrete moment in the grass, however, the firm, monastic, almost religious solidity of the whole system of Western beliefs symbolised by this idyllic “little world” is suddenly about to be undermined by a slightly more eastern whiff, “a dim sense of having been kissed very much, and surrounded by thin, cloudy, scented drapery” that, as a remainder of an “early twilight” still lingers in the outskirts of Daniel’s consciousness (1998: 140). “A new idea had entered his mind, and was beginning to change the aspect of his habitual feelings,” and, although the “deep blush” in his face, “which had come when he first started up” gradually subsides, his “features” nonetheless keep retaining a “look of subdued activity,” indicating a process of internal reconfiguration that foreshadows some fundamental change. This may well serve as an example for one of Spencer’s nascent consciousnesses jumping into life, “a new guest” with an “enigmatic veiled face,” complicating the mental predisposition currently in operation for at least a transitory moment (1998: 141).

But in contrast to Spencer’s theory, in this case the marginally present other options are not just the adherents of sensual impressions but the progenies of cultural reception. “Having read Shakespeare as well as a great deal of history,” the disadvantages of illegitimate children are already part of Daniel’s implicit stock of knowledge. He well knew “about men who were born out of wedlock and were held unfortunate in consequence,” but he only had never associated this strand of knowledge with his own situation – not, that is to say, “until this moment when there had darted into his mind with the magic of quick comparison, the possibility that here was the secret of his own birth, and that the man whom he called uncle was really his father” (Eliot 1998: 141). Obviously, the history of Daniel’s mind is not limited to the natural history of biological evolution and Lamarckian inheritance as it decoratively unrolls itself in Sir Hugo’s picture gallery, with its smiling politicians, lavishly painted lords and ladies “and so on through refined editions of the family type [...] until the line ended with Sir Hugo and his younger brother Henleigh” (1998: 140). It is also and most prominently the cultural history of his reading that has acquainted him with a knowledge of “imaginary worlds” which now “rushed towards his own history and spent its pictorial energy there, explaining what he knew, representing the unknown” (1998: 141-142). It is a history that does not only define him as the particular person he knows himself to be (“explaining what he knew”), but also includes the possibility of converting him into someone he does not yet know himself to be (“representing the unknown”).

The history of Daniel's mind, in other words, is a history of possible, imaginary histories that has endowed him with the metaphorical faculty of regarding or picturing one thing in terms of another that it is not, but may well be or become. It is a vast, inexhaustible reservoir, releasing ever-fresh images that, now that his suspicion has been aroused, take "possession of him with the force of fact for the first time told" and leave him with the "secret impression" of "something like a new sense in relation to all the elements of his life" (1998: 142). From now on, this new sense (or sense of the new) both enriches and destabilises the "seemingly-single succession" (Spencer) of his life by a parallel potential of plural series, such that "round every trivial incident which imagination could connect with his suspicions, a newly-roused set of feelings were ready to cluster themselves" (1998: 142). As a consequence, the whole of his environment loses its self-evidence; it can no longer be smoothly adjusted to his consciousness, but presents itself as an impenetrable vapour of details, all potentially plotting against his cherished beliefs. Daniel falls into an attitude of nervous tension, so that the impressions he receives resist being translated into a coherent series, since the intentional home of his self breaks apart from the contexts it is, according to Spencer, supposed to correspond with. His surroundings turn into a set of questions but cannot answer to his conscious thoughts. "Did Turvey the valet know?—and old Mrs French the housekeeper?—and Banks the bailiff?" (1998: 144). In the following course of his life, Daniel increasingly gives in to the speculative possibilities that emerge from the cracks and fissures in his questionable sense of identity. In other words, rather than silencing the questions about the absent basis of his subjectivity by withdrawing to the stability of the well-known concepts he had grown up with, he engages in an avid responsiveness to and sympathy for everything that is not yet part of his identity. His reductive attempt at self-decipherment starts to turn into an exploratory process of self-invention, spawned by a longing for "the sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely, and rob him of the choice that might come from a free growth" (1998: 153). The negative effect of the "many-sided sympathy" thus cultivated, however, is an increasing indecision that goes along with Daniel's inability to follow "any persistent course of action" (1998: 307). The current of his consciousness changes into a decentred flurry that lacks any sense of integrity precisely because the characteristic "indefiniteness in his sentiments" has developed into the habit to identify with almost any attitude he can imagine, such that the simultaneous possibilities tend to neutralise each other and "a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity for him" (1998: 307).

It hardly appears as a coincidence, therefore, that it is one of Daniel's favourite occupations to spend his time in a boat on the river Thames, floating along on the borderline that both distinguishes and connects two parts of a whole, but belongs to neither of them. It is as if this non-setting between anywhere and nowhere responded most appropriately to the "contemplative mood" (1998: 157) of someone whose character lacks the firm ground that might enable him to strike up a definite alliance with any one place or habit. Indeed, both mentally and physically, Daniel seems to be "satisfied to go with the tide and be taken back by it," indulging "himself in that solemn passivity" of the "mellowing" evening light, "when thinking and desiring melt together imperceptibly" (1998: 160). Eliot writes:

By the time he had come back with the tide past Richmond Bridge the sun was near setting; and the approach of his favourite hour – with its deepening stillness and darkening masses of tree and building between the double glow of the sky and the river – disposed him to linger as if they had been an unfinished strain of music. (1998: 160)

If, as Spencer would say, an intelligent adjustment of the mental and the physical presupposes the integration of each different state of consciousness into some before known order of experience, such that the internal structure of consciousness becomes increasingly independent of any external stimuli, then this scene could be described as a complete inversion of Spencer's position. Here, the powerful impressions that impose themselves on Daniel's senses do not become translated into a psychical state that could initiate any appropriate physical "motor changes" (Spencer: 1910 I, 371, *passim*), but seem to remain "unfinished," stuck, as it were, halfway between. As a consequence, Daniel's capacity to act is overwhelmed by a tangibly voluptuous heaviness ("deepening stillness," "darkening masses"), lulling him into a self-indulgent passiveness that causes him to stay his movement and let his consciousness give way to the dreamy atmosphere around him:

He was forgetting everything else in a half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he was looking at, thinking how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape,— when the sense of something moving on the bank opposite him where it was bordered by a line of willow bushes, made him turn his glance thitherward. In the first moment he had a darting presentiment about the moving figure; and now he could see the small face with the dying sunlight upon it. (Eliot 1998: 160-161)

The first part of this sentence is a good illustration of precisely the state of static indifference resulting from a simultaneous co-presence of plural options that Spencer so eagerly tries to subdue. When the mind ceases to organise its perceptions in terms of a hierarchical set of central tenets, there is nothing that, at any time, could not take the place of this centre, and the intentional coherence of ideas threatens to collapse into an atomistic assemblage of thought-options, each of which equals the other. And if it were possible to turn the constant shifting between these options into a habit, this would imply not only the loss of any sense of personality, but also result in the loss of a subject to assign the habit to. In this scene, things have not got as far as that. Daniel has obviously not lost his character among the many contents that might people his consciousness, otherwise he could no longer consciously think of doing so. Nonetheless his conscious disposition has reached a state of indefinite awareness that borders on the non-conscious; and his mental animation has amplified almost to the degree of making him physically inanimate. Yet, this plastic state of reverie, verging upon cognitive disintegration, is also the state in which the capacities of the mind are least restricted by any prefabricated cluster of habits or beliefs and therefore most receptive to impressions that would not otherwise have entered the scope of attention. Hence when Daniel senses the moving something on the opposite bank, which ultimately turns out to be the young Jewess Mirah, he is intuitively taken to its figure, even though he has passed it only once before on his tour down the Thames. Then, the view of the miserable girl had merely added another "image of helpless sorrow" that could "easily" become absorbed with his muddled and detached attitude towards the "routine of the world" (1998: 160). This time, however, Daniel's diffusive, loitering perception is irresistibly arrested by a "darting presentiment" that supplies him with an intentional focus and finally stirs him into action (1998: 160-161).

IV

As we shall see, the significance of this scene and everything that follows from it stretches far beyond Daniel's individual life as a character; it concerns the form and development of the novel as a whole. For, in the long run, not only does it acquaint Daniel with a new perspective on a religious tradition, Judaism, that he had so far been largely ignorant of, but, by doing so, it also, through the figure of Mordecai, ultimately introduces a foreign, strangely romantic and even potentially irrational element into a cultural setting that had, as yet, been firmly dominated by an aristocratic sense of enlightened, modern, cosmopolitan Englishness. Within the course of the narrative, therefore, the appearance of Mirah literally makes a difference. It brings Daniel's indistinct sense of personal identity into direct contact with a distinct other that motivates him to associate and, eventually, identify his self with a dimension that he had not yet known to be part of it. It enables him to slowly renounce his indifferent attitude, because it enables him to consider both the world and his existence in a different way. It makes him learn to relate to the other by relating to himself *as* another. In short, it helps him to redefine his individuality and gradually recognise himself as someone more specific. "His own face in the glass had during many years been associated with thoughts of some one whom he must be like," but until now this "some one" had remained indefinite, a constant source of doubts and questions, "one about whose character and lot he continually wondered, and never dared to ask" (1998: 158).

After he has got to know Mirah, however, the character he can identify his own existence by slowly and tentatively starts to take a more precise shape. For Daniel, therefore, meeting and getting to know Mirah functions as a kind of "catalyst for action" (Ragussis 1995: 282), wakening and regenerating his consciousness precisely by making him conscious of something beyond his consciousness that can provide him with a sense of direction to guide his thoughts and behaviour. He is made to open his mind towards a way of life and existence that had so far been "chiefly of the sort most repugnant to him," because, in spite of his strong sympathy for the oppressed and liminal, "his interest had never been practically drawn towards existing Jews" (Eliot 1998: 176). But it is drawn towards them from now on, and, in this way, what he had always regarded as no more than "an eccentric fossilized form" (1998: 306) turns into a live potential for revisiting his cultural affiliations as well as his sense of personal identity. It triggers a process of ethnographic self-investigation that unfolds co-extensively with the creative progression of the novel as a whole.

In its most general terms, then, *Daniel Deronda* may be seen as a novel about the emergence of specific intentions and coherent forms of consciousness and thus about the conditions of human agency. It deals with the sensual and cognitive processes of assimilation, conversion and integration by means of which human beings come to develop a sense of personal identity that provides them with the capacity to act in a particular fashion. This is why, in one way or another, all three major characters—Daniel, Gwendolen, and Mordecai—are, more or less successfully, engaged in processes of learning and re-learning in the course of which they have to find out how to relate and respond to their environment in a form that may sustain themselves both morally and intellectually. On the one hand, therefore, Eliot's novel may be said to deal with similar issues as Herbert Spencer's evolutionary psychology; on the other hand, however, it starts from completely different assumptions, for the processes of figural development are not exclusively modelled on a medium of biological life whose organic course of differentiation and integration naturally predisposes human beings towards ever more distinct and unified forms of cultural and

intellectual organisation. On the contrary, the novel is interested in what happens to the personal integrity of someone who already seems to have developed fairly tight and well-working correspondences with his social and cultural environment when he becomes conscious of the contingency and, hence, the potential inadequacy of these relationships. It deals with the personal crises that result from a character's awareness that his conscious self need not necessarily have become what it is, but could also be and become otherwise. It deals with what happens when conscious agency turns in on itself and starts to question the grounds upon which it makes the choices that allow it to dispose itself in terms of a continuous series of mental thoughts and physical actions. In short, it deals with the insecurities, doubts and disintegrating tendencies that threaten to irritate and obstruct the capacity to make the decisions that regulate human behaviour. It is a moot point whether such crises are brought about by something 'in' the individual character or by something 'outside' of him. But what is important is that they inevitably affect the capacity (Spencer would say: the intelligence) to adapt the one to the other and are therefore likely to lead to a reconfiguration of the very relationship between inside and outside, which may allow for new forms of consciousness and agency to emerge.

Such a process of reconfiguration is exactly what Daniel becomes entangled in. When he realises the contingency of the traditional English contexts he had so far defined his personal identity by, his sense of selfhood increasingly turns into a loosely floating signifier, waiting for "the influence that would justify partiality, and make him what he longed to be yet was unable to make himself – an organic part of social life" (Eliot 1998: 308). Instead of having a clear concept of his place and task in society, he feels displaced and lonely, "roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real" (1998: 308). As my analysis of the boating episode reveals, however, this indistinct, aimless state is also what makes Daniel's mind particularly susceptible to open itself to the nascent possibilities of perception that would normally elude the scope of attention. Indeed, at this stage he often tends to see beyond what is actually there, which "made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life" (1998: 175). This inclination to regard or imagine the actual as something potentially otherwise, is also what has him relate to Mirah's anxieties about her lost mother almost as if they were his own: "Something in his own experience caused Mirah's search after her mother to lay hold with peculiar force on his imagination" (1998: 175). Consequently, the "living reality" of Mirah "before him" becomes pregnant with an unborn revelation still about to come. Her experience of loss and potential discovery resonates with a "suppressed consciousness" in Daniel's mind that a similar discovery "might lie hidden in his own lot." And although Daniel still does not "long to find anybody in particular" (1998: 322), this "suppressed consciousness" nonetheless makes him peculiarly sensitive to the possibility of finding somebody at all who might in one way or another prove relevant for "his own lot." It makes him sensitive to the possibility of finding and recognising himself in another, although he has no specific idea of whom exactly that might be; and it is this newly roused sensitivity for a potential, but by no means necessary or expectable, discovery that makes him more and more alert to Jewish shops, names and, via some hesitations, chance diversions and circuitous routes, and that eventually brings about Daniel's encounter with Mordecai.

In sum, then, what turns Daniel's rescue of Mirah into such an important moment both for the (represented) development of Daniel's character and for the (representing) text as

a whole is that it opens this development towards a new range of possibilities that had as yet been completely absent from it. It unravels a sense of novelty and alterity, a new vision for the future of the very novel we read which soon becomes embodied in the prophetic figure of Mordecai. Correspondingly, right from the point of his first introduction in chapter XXXIII, Mordecai is presented as a rather odd and eccentric, almost exotic character, “a figure that was somewhat startling in its unusualness” because it does not at all fit into the ordinary framework of English modernity that had hitherto dominated the novel’s course of action. What is more, Mordecai’s whole appearance seems to point beyond common modes and measures: His age is “difficult to guess” due to “the dead yellowish flatness of the flesh, something like an old ivory carving,” making his body highly suggestive of a statue. His “physiognomy” calls up “a prophet of the Exile” or “some New Hebrew poet of the mediaeval time,” and his “Jewish face” is “wrought into an intensity of expression apparently by a strenuous eager experience in which all the satisfaction had been indirect and far off” (Eliot 1998: 326). Though physically worn and emaciated, in other words, Mordecai’s whole existence seems to be concentrated in a spiritual vision that transcends all immediate experience; and despite the obvious “absence of ease in the present” (1998: 326) that is caused by his fragile and consumptive physique, he constantly betrays an “energetic certitude” (1998: 434), inspired by “the passionate current of an ideal life,” constantly “straining to embody itself” and made more and more “intense by resistance to imminent dissolution” (1998: 407). It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that “his coherent trains of thought” very often almost resemble “genuine dreams in their way of breaking off the passage from the known to the unknown” (1998: 406). They tend to lose contact with the stock of commonsensical knowledge by means of which their relation to the actual world could be measured and justified. They tend to become emancipated from habit and experience and thus turn themselves into an autonomous sphere of their own, a solipsistic universe whose coherence seems to rely more on an ideal image than on any empirical evidence.

It follows that, compared to Daniel’s, Mordecai’s mental relationship to the physical world around him is organised in almost the opposite way. Whereas Daniel lacks the psychical integrity and strength that would enable him to fit all his sensual impressions directly and uninterruptedly into a well consolidated mould of habitual cognition, Mordecai’s thinking is so much dominated by a single, uniform belief that he is always liable to project it onto every experience whatsoever, so that even “when he was bending over watch-wheels and trinkets [...] his imagination spontaneously planted him on some spot where he had a far-stretching scene” and “his thought went on in wide spaces” (1998: 406). Obviously, then, Mordecai does already possess precisely the kind of mental self-sufficiency and sense of direction that Daniel still largely misses. Psychically, at any rate, he seems far more assured of by whom or what he wants to have his personal identity defined. Physically, however, he is nervous and frail, while Daniel’s body looks healthy and calm (1998: 431). Taken together, it appears, the two characters could serve as perfect counterparts of each other, each providing what the other is lacking; and it is rather suggestive, therefore, that some time after his encounter with Mirah, Daniel is making his way down the river again, although this time, he has a more specific aim in mind. He wants to go to Ram’s Bookshop to meet Mordecai again, whom he had only seen once by this point. He does not even have to go as far as the book shop, however, for as he approaches Blackfriars Bridge, he already seems to be expected by the one he is looking for, Mordecai himself leaning over the parapet and watching out for the complementary match of his spiritual desire. Daniel immediately

recognises the “illuminated type of bodily emaciation and spiritual eagerness,” and starts to signal at him, which presently makes Mordecai quiver with excitement, “feeling in that moment that his inward prophecy was fulfilled.” His imagination blends every sensual detail into a deep “sense of completion,” fuelled by “this outward satisfaction of his longing” that he recognises in what is right before him: Daniel waving his arm (1998: 422).

The scene is crucial because it initiates what turns out to become a deeply sympathetic relationship between the two men. What is also crucial, however, is that this relationship is never an equal one. In fact, Mordecai certainly assumes the more coercive part within it, when he, with “an intensity of reliance that acted as a peremptory claim” (1998: 428), attempts to convince Daniel of their racial kinship. In this way, his passionate speeches function as performative acts by means of which he tries to convert Daniel into believing himself a Jew as well and adapting his mind unreservedly to Mordecai’s convictions and aspirations. Moreover, because they fulfil a critical function concerning the developmental logic of the narrative, two aspects of this function require particular emphasis. First, as Cynthia Chase has argued, Mordecai’s attempted conversion by linguistic act may be seen as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, preparing Daniel’s eventual conversion by genetic fact (1978: 222-223). It attempts to achieve by rhetorical persuasion what is later confirmed by physical revelation. Second and following from this, the more Daniel yields to the visionary spell of Mordecai, the more the novel departs from its realistic beginning in order to give way to the transforming influence of what F.R. Leavis has called the “Zionist inspiration” with its affinity to romance and magic (1967: 80). The more room it allocates to the discovery of a hidden Jewish plot behind the surface of an aristocratic English lifestyle, the more the narrative threatens to lose its coherence and fall apart into what is usually referred to as its English and its “Jewish part” (1967: 81). If and how these two strands can be reconciled is one of the most pervasive problems with which the novel has always confronted its readers, and many, following Leavis’s famous verdict, have come to the conclusion that they cannot be reconciled at all but “stand apart, on a large scale, in fairly neatly separable masses” (1967: 79). At any rate, the question of how to evaluate and interpret the significance of the Jewish part within the course of an otherwise English narrative has puzzled most critics since its publication. But this puzzling condition can be easily avoided if the two parts are not viewed as mutually exclusive (as they are most prominently in Leavis’s polemic), but are seen in terms of a dialogic interaction. This, as Amanda Anderson (1997) has shown, accords much better with what the novel itself seems to propose as a model for relating to the other. Indeed, as far as Daniel is concerned, to wholly replace his old (English) commitments with a completely new set of (Jewish) beliefs is never a serious option; and although Mordecai certainly exerts a strong “subduing influence” over him that he does not deny (Eliot 1998: 431), Daniel never simply gives in to the idealist, nationalist rhetoric of his new friend, but always retains a critical distance from it. He engages with the possibility of becoming another without abandoning who he has been; and even when he ultimately discovers that he is indeed a Jew by birth, this discovery does not instigate him to forsake his existing cultural affiliations altogether, but rather to redefine them in the light of another perspective.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Daniel Deronda is the title hero of the novel because, as I shall subsequently argue, in contrast to Mordecai or Gwendolen, he comes to represent a form of identity that manages to conjoin its different parts without trying to convene them into a single whole. It is even more appropriate, in addition, that this form of identity is associated with the model of Judaism because Judaism has always been the paradigmatic example for a kind of communal integrity that is not based on a unifying ground or land or

nation. It cannot be reduced to a particular source or origin, but constitutes itself in terms of an open, decentralised communication between dispersed entities. What Judaism is, according to this view, cannot be bounded and confined. It cannot be located in a common place, since it can only exist in and through the relation between different ones. Consequently, everyone, everywhere may, in principle, become Jewish, for Jewishness is a diasporic and decentred form of identity that may, in fact, even be said to disrupt “the very categories of identity” (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 705, 721). Certainly, as it is “not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectical tension with one another,” its unity can never come to rest and may show itself in a changing variety of associations and configurations (1993: 721). More precisely, as a diasporic people, Jews have always had to define themselves in relation both to a distinct national culture and to an indistinct transnational community of fellow Jews, which may explain why discussions about such issues as, “solidarity, citizenship, cultural distinctiveness,” acculturation, assimilation, particularity and universality have notoriously revolved around the figure of the Jew (Golan, Mudimbe et al. 1999: 104). Indeed, by virtue of his unsettled location and his multiple possible alliances, as Bryan Cheyette has argued, ‘the Jew’ could be “made to occupy an incommensurable number of subject positions which traverse a range of contradictory discourses” (1993: 8). This is especially true for the context of 19th century England where the theme of Jewishness was intricately bound up with a growing destabilisation of national and religious identity (cf. Ragussis 1995). Leaving aside these wider historical ramifications, however, the key point to note here is that, in this way, Judaism was typically construed as a specific form of identity that was, by definition, somewhat indefinite. It signified a state of being whose future was essentially unfinished and open. Thus it was both sufficiently capable of incorporating a heterogeneous multiplicity of different ways of life and particularly susceptible to a kind of prophetic yearning that, nonetheless, believed these differences to be informed by a common germ that could and should be revived and made to grow into an organic union, “pregnant with diviner form” (Eliot 1998: 449). In *Daniel Deronda* this romantic yearning for the resuscitation of an “organic centre” (1998: 454) and the return to a common home land is characteristically represented by Mordecai, but it is important that Mordecai’s position, despite its prominence, is by no means the only one that the novel presents as Jewish. In fact, the text contains a wide range of different Jewish characters, comprising such heterogeneous figures as the artist Klesmer, the actress Princess Halm-Eberstein, the ordinary merchant family of the Cohens, Mr. Ram, and some of the people at the Philosopher’s club, almost all of whom seem to be of rather varying and doubtful descent (1998: 446). Obviously, none of these different figures unreservedly subscribes to Mordecai’s Zionist zeal, and it remains very much an open question whether the sole fact that all of them nonetheless are somehow aligned with the Jewish faith is by itself sufficient for them to form a collective identity.

V

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that any straight opposition between an English and a Jewish part is far too simple to adequately capture the internal complexity of Eliot’s novel in general, because whatever may constitute its Jewish part is in itself split up into a miscellaneous mixture of smaller parts that cannot be straightforwardly synthesised into a single, uniform whole. When Mordecai sits at one table with the Cohen family, for example,

his whole appearance and demeanour, the text tells us, “could hardly” have presented “a stronger contrast to the Jew at the other end of the table,” that is, to Ezra Cohen. In Eliot’s words:

It was an unaccountable conjunction—the presence among these common, prosperous, shopkeeping types, of a man who, in an emaciated, threadbare condition, imposed a certain awe on Deronda, and an embarrassment at not meeting his expectations. (1998: 339)

It is the very unaccountability of the conjunction by means of which Mordecai is or may be connected with his fellow Jews that makes it almost impossible to judge him according to a particular set of expectations. If there is anything representatively Jewish about him, indeed, then it is the slipperiness of his identity that allows for a motley variety of projections and identifications, so that even “under Ezra Cohen’s roof” he is not simply regarded as a Jew, whatever that would mean, but “as a compound of workman, dominie, vessel of charity, inspired idiot, man of piety, and (if he were inquired into) dangerous heretic” (1998: 407). Precisely because the exact relation or conjunction between Mordecai and those he lives with remains unclear and “unaccountable,” it seems he can be related to in all kinds of different ways. He is both strikingly singular and remarkably indeterminate because his very singularity incites a host of different comparisons. He may be likened to everything because he is unlike anything specific, and it is this “fertile insubstantiality” that is typical for the way Judaism is generally modelled in Eliot’s novel (Novak 2004: 60). Jewishness is a distinct state of being, yet it always stands in an “unaccountable conjunction” with other possible states of being. It is fully defined, yet always open to redefinition because it cannot be reduced to a racial ground or a nation. It is aligned with a specific place, yet always reaches out towards other possible places that it may equally become aligned with. It is one identity, yet always in the process of becoming another – not necessarily, though, but potentially. It is an emergent property.

Pushing the argument a step further, ‘Jewishness’ may therefore even be regarded as a metaphorical model for the general condition of the human mind as described by Herbert Spencer. That is, it may be regarded as a form of consciousness that can only constitute its selective coherence in terms of an interactive relation to a wide range of ‘nascent consciousnesses’ that surround and, therefore, tend to both widen and disintegrate it. In this sense, ‘Jewishness’ becomes emblematic of a psychological framework whose actual course of self-constitution operates on a principal contingency that constantly exposes it to a rich, inexhaustible diversity of possible courses. During the nineteenth century, this fundamental contingency gradually came to be seen as an inescapable condition of human life, and the persistent scientific ventures into the material conditions and biological origins of mind and body are themselves all symptoms of the awareness that their existential constitution need no longer be accepted as a necessary emanation of God’s will, but could also be, and could still become, otherwise (cf. Ermarth 1997: 100-115; Herbert 2001).

As we have seen in the case of Daniel, this awareness may effectively manifest itself in a wavering state of sceptical indecision that gravely jeopardises the capacity to pursue any consistent line of action. Indeed, it is likely that the concern with origins and the past that is so characteristic of nineteenth century literature is to a large extent motivated by a highly problematic sense of agency that could no longer be sure of its premises and thus necessarily became confronted with what George Steiner has called “the most deep-seated” of human

crises, “that of the future tense” (2001: 12). As for *Daniel Deronda*, at any rate, it is remarkable that Gwendolen, Daniel and Mordecai all seem to wrestle with a variation of this crisis. Although each of them represents a different strategy to cope with it, it is only Daniel, in the end, who finds a satisfactory way to do so. A quick (and, for that matter, somewhat rude) comparison with the other two characters may elucidate this claim. Whereas Gwendolen encounters the aimlessness of her existence by resorting to a defeatist spirit of gambling and performance that relies exclusively on superficial appearances, material matters and, thus, in the double sense of the word, on fortune, Mordecai’s whole striving and thinking is totally preoccupied by an almost fanatic belief in recuperating some ideal state of unity and harmony among the Jewish people. As strikingly different as they are, both of these engagements may be said to compensate for an experience of lack and loss that results from a disappointed recognition of the relativity and insubstantiality of human existence. Whereas Gwendolen complacently casts off the desire for any permanent values beyond the pleasures of the immediate, Mordecai obstinately and desperately tries to cling to it. Interestingly, in this way, both of them ultimately lose their personal freedom and autonomy by delivering it to an authority external to them. Hence, when the material insurance which Gwendolen’s playful agency has rested upon, namely her mother’s fortune, breaks away, all she can do is to marry the riches of Grandcourt and give herself over to his tyranny. Similarly, Mordecai deliberately bequeaths his whole existence to an imaginary ideal that controls everything he says and does.

Both, then, represent a form of confined subjectivity, whereas Daniel ultimately learns to steer a middle course by which he manages to balance the extremes of total freedom and total dependence in a form of “cultural self-understanding that might best be called reflective dialogism” (Anderson 1997: 44). Here, Judaism is important because it comes to supply him with an analogue of that mixed condition by which he can identify the very contingency and negativity of his mental being and thereby turn it into a positive state of belief and self-confidence that is both sufficiently distinct to serve as a basis for subjective agency and sufficiently open to the experience of other possible states of mind that may, at any point, cause him to redefine his intentional presuppositions. In short, Judaism, for him, turns into a model of self-representation that enables him to locate his very sense of dislocation and thus cultivate an emergent form of selfhood and agency that is nicely captured by Kalonymos when he asks Daniel whether he was “no longer angry at being something more than an Englishman” (Eliot 1998: 616). The point of this quote is that, once Daniel acknowledges his Jewishness, he does not cease to be an Englishman, yet he has become something more than that. He has become an Englishman that regards himself as Jewish. “This thinking one thing atop of or in terms of another” (Casagrande 1990: 459) perfectly corresponds to the definition of an emergent activity, as it has been advanced, for example, by Philip Clayton. “Emergence,” he writes “is about *more than but not altogether other than*” (2004: 39). It is about one state of being that is constantly in the process of becoming another, which means that it cannot be reduced to a stable ground or cause. “I shall call myself a Jew,” Daniel tells Kalonymos. “But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races” (Eliot 1998: 620). As an emergent state of mind, Jewishness does not refer to an everlasting unity (as advocated by Mordecai), but to a creative, flexible condition that constantly tends to produce “difference and divergence from the already-existing” (Casagrande 1990: 459) because it constantly remains open to change its horizon and learn of other minds. In fact, the only thing Daniel wants to retain from his grandfather is “the notion

of separateness with communication” and when he goes back to Mordecai after the revelation of his Jewish parentage, he does so, consequently, “to admit agreement and maintain dissent” (Eliot 1998: 620, 638).

In sum, Judaism, as it comes to be epitomised by Daniel, encapsulates this “balance of separateness and communication” (Eliot 1998: 619). It is a distinct form of identity, and yet it is always ready to transform itself by communicating with what it is not, but may well be or become. What is more, in this sense, Judaism may also be regarded as a model for the creative identity on which the text’s whole fictional performance is premised. As a literary artefact, that is to say, *Daniel Deronda* enacts the same kind of emergent condition that it represents. It proceeds as an English narrative that is always open to redefine itself in terms of its Jewish part and vice versa. It is always potentially more, but never altogether other than what it pretends to be since its form allows for distinct experiences while its medium remains relatively fluid. Hence its aesthetic identity can neither be reduced to a particular set of intentions or beliefs nor subsumed under a steady succession, but carries along with it an element of contingency that, at any point, makes it prone to feed-back loops, sudden turns and new directions for reading and thinking (cf. Attridge 2004; Abbott 2008). It is something specific, but nonetheless invites ever-fresh interpretations; in this way, the textual performance itself exemplifies an emergent form of agency.

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In *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* [online]. 2009, vol. 1, no. 1 [cit. 2009-06-23]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JLS01/pdf_doc/01.pdf>.