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Eliot and Racism: How Should One Read 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!'

Most of the major writers in the Victorian period can be seen as racist to a greater or lesser degree. According to Edward Said, even Marx and Mill are not immune, 'both of them seemed to have believed that such ideas as liberty, representative government, and individual happiness must not be applied to the Orient for reasons that today we would call racist'.¹ In many of these writers anti-Semitism was the most obvious form of racism and this continued beyond the Victorian period, as is evident even in such figures as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. It used to be thought that the exception to this widespread anti-Semitism and racism in general was George Eliot. Not only did she support Zionism as an ideal and have a deep interest in every aspect of Jewish thought and culture but she was also sympathetic to other groups subject to much prejudice, such as the Gypsies, as is evident in her verse drama *The Spanish Gypsy*, and the Irish. However, a significant number of recent critics have nevertheless linked Eliot with racism, even with anti-Semitism.

Some of that criticism can be seen as lacking credibility, at least if one thinks convincing evidence is important. For example, Sandor Gilman draws extreme conclusions from half a sentence in *Daniel Deronda*: 'And one man differs from another, as we all differ from the Bosjesman' (DD, 274), claiming that this reference to the Bushmen assumes 'a polygenetic view of race',² polygenesis being the belief that races have evolved from more than one set of ancestors so that they are seen as belonging to different lineages. Polygenesis was rejected by Darwin, and among its main nineteenth-century proponents were the notorious racists Robert Knox and James Hunt. Eliot's writings as a whole strongly suggest that she had no sympathy with their views and like Darwin supported monogenesis. However, Gilman's view has been accepted and taken further by some of Eliot's post-colonial critics:

[*Daniel Deronda*'s] strongest authorial imputation of a dehumanizing bestiality comes in the off-hand aside that types the Kalahari Bushman as an animalistically undisciplined alien [which] speaks for an emotively entrenched scale of prejudice defined around the stigma of subhumanness.³

Gilman goes on to argue that this 'we' of Eliot's effectively establishes an absolute racial divide [in which] blacks occupied an antithetical position to whites [with] Jews, as Gilman concludes, fall[ing] just this side of the human on the 'scale of humanity' ... so long as, *Daniel Deronda* seems to say, they conduct themselves ... in a suitably exemplary way ... Hence the clear distinction between two kinds of Jews in the text.⁴

Even the editor of the current Penguin edition of *Daniel Deronda* appears to accept Gilman's claim in his note on the Bushmen reference: 'she does seem to imply an essential difference between "us" and "them"'.⁵ Since the Bushmen were perceived in the Victorian period as the most ancient people on Earth – hunter-gatherers whose way of life had been unchanged for at least 20,000 years – to suggest that they are different in fundamental ways from readers of *Daniel Deronda*, or even from Europeans in general in the second half of the nineteenth century, hardly need imply polygenesis. Darwin has a few unflattering references to them in *The Descent of Man*, referring to them as 'the lowest existing savages' and as 'the degraded Bushmen of S. Africa', but they are clearly human for him though closest to the 'ancestors of man'.⁶ To erect a racist philosophy for Eliot on the basis of a comment that does no more than allude to the fact that there are radical cultural differences between the groups that make up humanity would suggest that an ideological agenda underlies the critical perspective of some of her critics.⁷

An argument that deserves more serious consideration is Edward Said's claim that Eliot is complicit with European colonialism, and therefore with racism, in his essay 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims', which I discussed in Chapter 10, where he argues that in supporting Zionism in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot leaves out of account and thus nullifies the existing inhabitants of Palestine. Said does not discuss *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, whose final and longest chapter, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', is more explicitly proto-Zionist than *Daniel Deronda*. For a significant number of post-Said critics it is this essay that most clearly associates Eliot with racism and political conservatism, and they make significant use of it in discussions of *Daniel Deronda* and go much further than Said, claiming that both texts are complicit with racism in its various forms, including anti-Semitism. In this chapter and the next I shall discuss in some detail 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as interpretations of it have been central to the argument that racism and a conservative political agenda are a constitutive part of both Eliot's thinking and writing. A further consideration is whether Eliot's political critics are adequate readers of a writer of highly self-conscious literary texts like Eliot.

'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' has generally been separated off from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* and treated as a text that is primarily significant for providing insight into Eliot's ideas and beliefs. Yet a case can be made for *Impressions* being a work of some literary sophistication. This case has been made most strongly by Nancy Henry who in the introduction to her edition of *Impressions* associates it with 'early Modernist experimentation' and argues that there is no simple and straightforward access to Eliot's views and beliefs since 'the relationship between ancient Theophrastus, modern Theophrastus, and George Eliot'⁸ is complex and difficult to disentangle. However, the great majority of commentators on 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' – indeed other chapters of *Impressions* have not been much discussed – have little interest in

it as a literary text and quote passages as if they reflect the views of the author in literal terms, Theophrastus as narrator being seen merely as ‘an enabling mouthpiece for Eliot’s increasingly cantankerous commentary on life’.⁹ Even critics who are basically sympathetic to Eliot and have no obvious ideological axe to grind have tended to take this view and are thus troubled by ‘elements that appear almost jingoistic’.¹⁰ I shall argue that ignoring the literary aspects of ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ leads to grossly distorted readings of it and critics’ claim that it directly represents views that can be identified with racism and jingoism have little justification.

The following passage from ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ is often quoted by critics of Eliot in support of the view that she is as subject to racist attitudes as her contemporaries:

Let it be admitted that it is a calamity to the English, as to any other great historic people, to undergo premature fusion with immigrants of alien blood; that its distinctive national characteristics should be in danger of obliteration by the predominating quality of foreign settlers. I do not only admit this, I am ready to unite in groaning over the threatened danger. To one who loves his native language ... it is an affliction as harassing as the climate, that on our stage, in our studios, at our public and private gatherings, in our offices, warehouses, and workshops, we must expect to hear our beloved English with its words clipped, its vowels stretched and twisted ... marred beyond recognition. (*ITS*, 158–9)

According to Marc E. Wohlfarth’s reading of this passage, ‘Like so many of her contemporaries, Eliot is obsessed by the possibility of miscegenation’,¹¹ and for Bryan Cheyette Eliot was ‘echoing Trollope’s racially degenerate England of *The Way We Live Now* or *The Prime Minister*’.¹² Susan Meyer sees it as part of Eliot’s ‘deeper agenda’, which is to ‘celebrate nationalism’, which Meyer identifies with the promotion of the idea of racial purity, while even Eliot’s proto-Zionism for her is in ‘continuity with an imperialist ideology, a belief in white superiority over dark races, and a certain distaste for the Jews’.¹³ Such critics read ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ as if Eliot is speaking in her own voice in order to communicate her ideas directly to a non-specific readership. The effect of this is to set aside such matters as the narrator and his particular characterization, the structure of the essay as a literary artefact and the readership that the narrator believes he is addressing. The element of humour in the passage, as in ‘it is an affliction as harassing as the climate’ – surely intentionally bathetic in its context – is also ignored. The passage is thus divorced from its literary context and interpreted as a simple expression of racist attitudes.

A literary interpretation of ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ should consider why Eliot uses a fictive narrator and explore the relationship between the narrator and the audience he is addressing. It is characteristic of Eliot to keep some distance between her ‘real’ self and her narrators. When she was urged by John Blackwood to expand on the political views implied in *Felix Holt*,

what she produced was the essay, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', published in 1868, in which the persona of Felix Holt, her fictional character, is retained. It may be that a reason she continued to use a pseudonym when there was no longer any need for it was that it created some distance between narrator and author. In *Impressions*, however, this distancing between author and narrator is particularly complex given the witty and learned nature of this text and the clear separation between Eliot and her personalized narrator. Virtually every chapter in *Impressions* is a critical reflection on some aspect of Victorian life or attitudes, and keeping some distance between herself as author and Theophrastus would have been even more important – 'I have a repugnance to anything like an introduction of my own personality to the public' (*Letters*, VI, 280) – especially in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' where the critique of Victorian England and the English is at its most direct. To ignore the relationship between narrator and readership, as critics have generally done, and thus to abstract passages from their context and read them as simple expressions of Eliot's own ideas and opinions is like reading a classic Browning dramatic monologue without considering the interaction between the speaker and whom the speaker is addressing and how this affects the structure of the speaker's argument, the nature of his rhetoric, its persuasive function and the role of the implied author.

A crucial consideration in interpreting the essay is its intended readership. I shall argue that it is specifically addressed to a Victorian readership that the narrator assumes is predominantly anti-Semitic and generally racist, and that the essay is designed not simply to attack in a direct fashion the racism of its readers but to use literary methods to persuade them to change or at least reflect on their attitudes. Mere high principled condemnation of the prejudices of the implied readers would hardly be effective given the deep-seated nature of English prejudice against Jews and would be more likely to be counterproductive. What the narrator does (or more exactly what Eliot makes him do) therefore is to admit that anti-Semitic attitudes and fear of foreigners in general are understandable and that he has some sympathy with their views. This rhetorical strategy places Theophrastus to some degree on the same level as his audience and thus makes him more likely to be listened to and to be persuasive in his critique of both anti-Semitism and hostility to foreigners. One should emphasize that Theophrastus's anti-racism is directly stated on the opening page of the essay where he associates negative views of the Jews with 'the prejudiced, the puerile, the spiteful, and the abysmally ignorant' (*ITS*, 143), but to go on to refer directly to his readers in such terms would surely merely alienate them.

What Eliot's critics see as direct expressions of Eliot's ideas and opinions – as with the passage quoted earlier – can be reinterpreted as Theophrastus attempting to achieve sympathetic contact with his racist audience in order to make that audience more receptive to his general critique of anti-Semitism

and racism in the broader sense. The repeated use of the words 'we', 'us' and 'our' is particularly significant as this exemplifies Theophrastus's strategy of establishing some rapport with the prejudices of his Victorian readers. In marked contrast to Theophrastus's apparently sympathetic understanding of his readers' prejudices, Eliot's personal views on prejudice towards Jews, as expressed in her well-known letter about *Daniel Deronda* to Harriet Beecher Stowe, make it clear that she was outraged by English anti-Semitism, had no sympathy with it and roundly condemns her fellow countrymen:

But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom *we English* come into contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us ... Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called 'educated' making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. (*Letters*, VI, 301, emphasis added)

The tone of this letter is quite different from that of Theophrastus in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' In particular, the 'we' in the phrase 'we English' is in sharp contrast to Theophrastus's use of 'we' as it indicates her shame at being connected with such attitudes on the part of the English. It is likely that Eliot is alluding ironically to Arnold's 'we English, a nation of Indo-European stock'¹⁴ in his discussion of Hebraism and Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy*. Theophrastus's use of 'we', 'us' and 'our' is Arnoldian in tone as this serves his rhetorical purposes, but Eliot in her letter is clearly dissociating herself from Arnold and a questioning of his views is implicit in both *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' Arnold's praise in *Culture and Anarchy* of the 'devout energy'¹⁵ he equates with Hebraism because he associates it with what he sees as the positive aspects of English Puritanism did not lead him to admire or value Jewish civilization and culture as is clear in both *Culture and Anarchy* and *Literature and Dogma*, published four years later in 1873. Indeed Arnold's view of the Jews is close to that of Eliot in her letter of 1848 to John Sibree – 'Everything *specifically* Jewish is of low grade' (*Letters*, I, 247, emphasis in original) – a view which her later writings repudiate.

When Theophrastus discusses the doubts of some liberals as to whether Jews and other migrants can be ever be integrated into English society despite their having been accorded civil rights he again suggests that English fears on this score are understandable, and he uses the conventional language associated with racism in seemingly confirming the *idée reçue* (one still current) that the English are being swamped by foreigners: both Jews and Germanic immigrants

‘who have been settling among us for generations ... are still pouring in to settle’; ‘Semitic Christians swarm among us’; Greeks ‘are objectionally strong in the city’; ‘the Scotch are more numerous and prosperous here in the South than is quite for the good of us Southerners’ and ‘it is felt in high quarters that we have always been too lenient towards [the Irish]’ (*ITS*, 158). There is, however, a humorous and ironic undercurrent in this paragraph in the very hyperbolic nature of its language, in references to Scots’ cheekbones being ‘higher ... than English taste requires’ and which ‘has not yet been quite neutralised’, and to the fact that so many Scots and Irish are employed in the English press, ‘thus driving many Englishmen to honest and ineloquent labour’. In taking the language of swamping – as in ‘pouring in to settle’ and ‘swarm among us’ – in regard to immigration as literally representing Eliot’s views, critics identify her with the racism and jingoism that is being called into question and thus interpret the rhetorical strategy of Theophrastus’s seeming empathy with English fears as the real substance of the essay, concluding that it is only, as Meyer puts it, ‘ostensibly a defense of the Jews’. What would appear to be the substance – the attack on anti-Semitic and racist attitudes – is thus seen as merely a front for Eliot’s English nationalism, which is defined as essentially racist: ‘But the essay’s deeper agenda is to celebrate nationalism, and it demonstrates the way Eliot’s celebration of Jewish nationalism is at heart about English nationalism, about guarding the boundaries of the English nation’.¹⁶

That the narrator’s apparent sympathy with his readers’ fears is a device to serve his persuasive purpose is not considered by Eliot’s critics. Although Theophrastus recognizes that large numbers of migrants create a problem for a nation’s ‘sense of corporate existence’ (*ITS*, 144), he differs from his implied audience in rejecting the idea that this provides justification for either racist attitudes or for supporting an end to immigration or asylum. To ‘spike away the peaceful foreigner, would be a view of international relations not in the long-run favourable to the interests of our fellow-countrymen; for we are at least equal to the races we call obtrusive in the disposition to settle wherever money is to be made and cheaply idle living to be found’ (*ITS*, 159–60).

Few commentators consider the structure of the argument in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’; yet that structure determines the overall context in which the passages that Eliot’s critics cite as racist have their meaning and rhetorical effect. The fundamental idea that is being promulgated is that memory is essential to the health both of a nation and of the individual consciousness.¹⁷ The narrator believes his audience would not disagree with that and to persuade it further cites modern examples where the revival of a national consciousness through recovered memory has had beneficial effects, such as the emergence in Europe of a Greek and an Italian nation. In neither case is race mentioned as a factor in this ‘reviving nationality’ (*ITS*, 143). Indeed in the case of Greece ‘the presence of ancient Greece in the consciousness of European men’ (*ITS*, 144) was an essential factor even though it was recognized that ‘the infiltration of other than

Greek blood' dissociated modern Greece from classical Greece in any racial sense. Indeed Theophrastus claims not have a high opinion of modern Greeks – 'many modern Greeks are highly disreputable characters' – but nevertheless 'the preservation of national memories' on the part of both Europeans and the inhabitants of Greece has been instrumental in creating 'a free modern Greece'.

However, Theophrastus also points out that some concepts of nationality distort or romanticize the past when he discusses the nationalist sentiments of 'one of our living historians' (*ITS*, 144) who asserts forcibly 'our true affinities of blood and language' (*ITS*, 145) with the Anglo-Saxons and who 'virtually says', 'Let the poetic fragments which breathe forth their fierce bravery in battle and their trust in fierce gods who helped them, be treasured with affectionate reverence.' Although Theophrastus thinks the historian is right to stress the need for the English to feel a sense of continuity with their nation's past, he nevertheless reminds his readers that the Anglo-Saxons were pagan invaders and their modern descendants colonized America, in both cases crushing any resistance from the existing population, and have imposed their colonial will on India. Yet though the realities of colonization, ignored by the historian, are recognized by Theophrastus, it is clear he believes that colonization cannot simply be condemned in absolute terms since, as with England and more recently America, it can eventually lead to the emergence of 'great' nations. But though very much more aware of historical complexities than the historian, Theophrastus asserts he 'guides us rightly in urging us to dwell on the virtues of our ancestors with emulation' in order to foster a sense of national identity: '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 immediate material possession, but in the satisfaction of a great feeling that animates the collective body as with one soul' (*ITS*, 146). But it is clear that such a collective sense does not depend on race but on consciousness: 'It is this living force of sentiment in common which makes a national consciousness' (*ITS*, 147). The 'nobleness of each individual citizen' as well as the nation 'depends on the presence of this national consciousness' (*ITS*, 146). Eliot's political critics, however, tend to ignore the following key sentence: 'we should recognise a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in *every other people*, and understand that its absence is a privation of the greatest good' (*ITS*, 147, emphasis added). Thus nationality as a concept is associated with cultural relativism and dissociated from racism, which by definition regards some races or peoples as intrinsically inferior to others.

Theophrastus's view of the Jews should be seen in this context, and again the argument is complex and needs careful interpretation. He recognizes that the Jews have long been considered as 'altogether exceptional' (*ITS*, 148) but denies that this makes them quite other than the rest of humanity. To take otherness too far has dangers for it can overemphasize exceptionality so that the Jews are either idealized by those who are pro-Jewish or despised or victimized by

those who are anti-Jewish, but for Theophrastus Jewish exceptionality is only a matter of degree and not a difference in kind from other peoples: 'Every nation of forcible character ... is so far exceptional' (*ITS*, 148). For Eliot the Jews may have 'a sense of separateness unique in its intensity' (*ITS*, 149), but this does not cut them off completely from other nationalities and from a shared humanity. The Jews' 'likeness' to other nationalities is stressed by Theophrastus, and it serves his particular persuasive purposes to focus on similarities to the English: the 'affinities of disposition between our own race and the Jews' (*ITS*, 150). It is clear, however, that 'race' is not being used in the sense that implies genetic or biological difference; its primary meaning is a people with a distinctive history, culture and tradition. The English in any case are not now a distinct race in the narrow sense; the origins of England may lie in Anglo-Saxon invasion and colonization, but further invasions from the Vikings, the Normans as well as the continual immigration that Theophrastus himself refers to from Scotland and Ireland, the continent of Europe and beyond, have made the English a hybrid people. Nor are modern Jews as distinct a race as the Jews who lived in Palestine at the time of the Roman conquest; the diaspora has inevitably led to mingling with other peoples, as even Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* recognizes. But unlike the English and other peoples, the dispersed Jews have no country to provide any centre or grounding for a 'sense of corporate existence' so that in order to preserve and maintain it Zealots emerged who 'advocated resistance to the death against the submergence of their nationality' (*ITS*, 149), thus fostering some unattractive Jewish traits (shared, however, by the Puritans, home-grown English zealots) such as arrogance and a sense of superiority, which did not endear them to the people among whom they lived and worsened their persecution.

Of course, it has often been pointed out that anti-Semitism is contradictory in that the Jews are blamed both for maintaining their Jewish religion and culture and thus being a separate group within society, and also for being rootless cosmopolitans, individualistic, free-thinking, unconnected with religion or tradition. The latter is the basis, for example, of T. S. Eliot's notoriously negative comments on Jews – 'reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable'¹⁸ – though ironically he also criticized George Eliot along similar lines for what he branded as 'heresy', an individualistic rationalism that devalues tradition and orthodoxy.¹⁹ A stock view of her as a standard Victorian rationalist underlies T. S. Eliot's view. But like him, she not only valued religion and tradition but also had doubts about cosmopolitanism when taken to an extreme, which she also associated with Jews though, in contrast to him, she makes it clear that it applies not only to Jews.

It is suggested, however, in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* that identifying Jews with a uniquely rootless cosmopolitanism is a form of anti-Semitism, though Theophrastus recognizes that cosmopolitanism does have application to certain Jews: 'Their monetary hold on governments is tending

to perpetuate in leading Jews a spirit of universal alienism (euphemistically called cosmopolitanism), even where the West has given them a full share in civil and political rights' (*ITS*, 157). However, Theophrastus also suggests that cosmopolitanism is being exploited for dubious ends since it is ideologically attractive to Western colonialism and global capitalism as it can be used to justify economic exploitation of countries such as China, 'destroying or plundering the fruits of his [the Chinaman's] labour on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough' (*ITS*, 147). The cosmopolitan mentality is thus seen as partly a product of imperialism and colonialism as the dominant ideologies in the West in the later nineteenth century. It is not unique to Jews but certain Jews because of a history that has subjected them to alienation may be well adapted to it.

Just as the Jews who adhere to their religion and traditions are exceptional in their intense sense of themselves as a distinctive people, those Jews who reject nationality and religion in favour of an individualistic or materialist philosophy are also exceptional, as one sees in *Daniel Deronda* in the characterizations of Deronda's mother and Mirah's and Mordecai's father Lapidoth. But the alienation and cosmopolitanism of such Jews are not different in kind from that which can affect alienated non-Jews. There's an obvious relationship between Deronda's mother and the non-Jewish Armgart, the eponymous heroine of Eliot's verse drama written in 1870–1. Also Lapidoth is related to such calculating non-Jewish egotists and gamblers as Christian in *Felix Holt* and, especially, Tito Melema in *Romola*, a Greek though not born in Greece, probably the most extreme example of an alienated consciousness in her work, described by Bernardo as 'one of the *demoni*, who are of no particular country ... His mind is a little too nimble to be weighted with all the stuff we men carry about in our hearts' (*R*, 252). It is significant, however, that in Chapter 1 of *Romola*, when Bratti first meets Tito, he asks him if he is 'a Hebrew'. Imagery associated with Darwinism, such as adaptation and exploiting chance, is used in connection with these characters.²⁰ With individualistic Jews like Lapidoth alienation can be particularly severe because, like Tito, they do not have a country that at least provides a minimal connection with a particular place; as Theophrastus puts it, individualistic Jews are 'capable of being everywhere acclimatised' (*ITS*, 157).

The Jews as represented in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' thus present a double lesson to a nation such as the English, one positive – through their heightened sense of Jewish identity despite having no country in a material sense – and one negative, the dangers of alienation. Alienation, however, is not always or not necessarily negative for Eliot, either for Jews or non-Jews, if it promotes an intellectual disinterestedness that is not motivated by egotism or devoid of idealism. In *Daniel Deronda* an artist like Klesmer can direct it positively into music so that it becomes a kind of equivalent to a sense of nationality, though he has little interest in race or nationhood, marrying an

English woman and uncommitted to any one country. He is an example of a more positive cosmopolitanism, being 'a felicitous combination of the German, the Sclave, and the Semite' (*DD*, 37). According to Catherine Arrowpoint, he has 'cosmopolitan ideas' and 'looks forward to the fusion of races' (*DD*, 206). Eliot also depicts Jews who are in between the extremes of zealotry for nationhood or a distinctive Jewish identity and alienation, whether positive or negative, such as Gideon and Pash who accept their Jewishness but are content to live in a country like England, and working or lower middle-class Jews like the Cohens.

Eliot's representation of the latter and the references to Jews in specific terms in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' have, however, led to accusations that Eliot succumbs to conventional Victorian anti-Semitism. Though the Cohens have been seen as embodying anti-Semitic stereotypes – '[*Daniel Deronda*] distorts Jewish characters into stereotypical incarnations of greed'²¹ – it is doubtful whether they are any more 'stereotypical' than Eliot's working-class characters. It has to be admitted that Eliot's aesthetic is problematic for those who look to literature for positive representations of oppressed groups. The rationale for her realist aesthetic is spelled out in her critique of Dickens in her essay, 'The Natural History of German Life', in which she accuses him of 'encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want; or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of *altruism*, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself'.²² As a novelist with a strong sociological awareness, for her people are not merely individual but share characteristics and attributes – shaped by cultural and social factors – that allow them to have a group as well as an individual identity. This emphasis on the social and cultural is fundamental to Eliot's aesthetic, and it informs her representation of disadvantaged social groups. To represent the working-class or lower class Jews – the latter having to try to make a living among people who have persecuted and despised them for centuries – without taking account of the negative consequences of that would be contrary to Eliot's realist aesthetic. Theophrastus points to the role of cultural pressures – especially living 'under the shadow of oppression' (*ITS*, 153) – in 'insisting that Jews are *made* viciously cosmopolitan by holding the world's money-bag' (*ITS*, 155, emphasis added), and goes on: 'Unquestionably the Jews, having been more than any other race exposed to the adverse moral influences of alienism, must, both in individuals and in groups, have suffered some corresponding moral degradation' (*ITS*, 156), but the Jews may have the advantage over the working class, since the negative effects of being 'an expatriated, denationalised race, used for ages to live among antipathetic populations' may be less than would be 'the case of a people who had neither their adhesion to a separate religion founded on historic memories, nor their characteristic family affectionateness' (*ITS*, 155–6), the latter a feature of the Cohens in *Daniel Deronda*.

It would hardly be surprising if traces of class snobbery may inform Eliot's representation of the working-class and lower class Jews since she is a Victorian middle-class intellectual writing about people whom she observes from the outside rather than knowing on a more intuitive level from within. Nevertheless attacks of the kind mentioned above can easily be directed back at her political critics. Are they not in effect objecting on ideological grounds to Eliot's aesthetic? Anything that could be construed as commenting critically or not sufficiently positively on any socially disadvantaged group is identified with stereotyping. The more sociologically minded Eliot sees one of fiction's social roles as being to focus on the social and cultural conditions that create the 'corresponding moral degradation' that she sees as an inevitable consequence of disadvantage. As she implies in her discussion of Dickens, if people subject to dehumanizing living conditions possess refined taste, are governed by altruism, then poverty, social oppression, lack of education could be seen as positively beneficial.

Although the Jews may be a lesson to the English of the spiritual benefit of preserving a national consciousness, the English have the advantage of a country that can potentially ground nationality, but Theophrastus's argument and the basis of his proto-Zionism is that without a country a distinctive Jewish culture will eventually be eroded, with Jews losing 'that separateness which is made their reproach' (*ITS*, 155), so that 'they may be in danger of lapsing into a cosmopolitan indifference equivalent to cynicism, and of missing that inward identification with the nationality immediately around them which might make some amends for their inherited privation'. It is this fear that leads Theophrastus to urge his English audience – after emphasizing the triviality of much English prejudice against immigrants in general and the Jews in particular ('having known a Mr Jacobson who was very unpleasant') (*ITS*, 161) – to consider the question as to whether there are 'the conditions present or approaching for the restoration of a Jewish state planted on the old ground as a centre of national feeling' (*ITS*, 162–3). There is no suggestion, despite the claims of some of Eliot's critics, that all Jews would and should embrace this project any more than one would expect all 'migratory Englishmen' to forsake 'their voluntary dispersion' (*ITS*, 156) and to return to England, yet who benefit from 'the consciousness of having a native country, the birthplace of common memories and habits of mind' (*ITS*, 156).

But, of course, what troubles many recent Eliot critics is that this entails colonizing Palestine, thus leading to accusations that Eliot's 'proto-Zionist impulse'²³ supports colonialism and imperialism, and consequently racism. But 'The Modern! Hep! Hep! Hep!', as I have already argued, makes it clear that colonization can neither be justified nor condemned in simple terms. Conflict between colonizers and existing inhabitants is almost an inevitability, and it may lead to war or even genocide; yet colonization may still produce nations that eventually promote the greater good of humanity. For Theophrastus and

implicitly for Eliot, if the only way of safeguarding the Jews' distinctive identity and culture, which would otherwise be lost over time, is for Jews settled in Europe and beyond to seek to colonize the land from which they were originally driven out, then the founding of a Jewish state must be supported, and the essay attempts to persuade its readers to take the same view. But both *Daniel Deronda*, in the discussion in the tavern in Chapter 42, and 'The Modern! Hep! Hep! Hep!' make it clear that this is an issue on which there are different views, many people, both Jews and non-Jews, supporting assimilation. Despite her last two works being politically committed to a proto-Zionist position, there is still a dialogic dimension.

It has not been my aim to deny that 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' is a highly political text or to claim that as a literary text it transcends the political, but to argue that in ignoring its literary aspects political critics create a caricature of Eliot as a believer in and promoter of imperialism and colonialism, a jingoistic and racist English nationalist, even an anti-Semite despite her support for Jewish nationhood. This shows the dire effect of reading a literary text as if it is a straightforward presentation of political ideas and arguments. Of course, literary texts emerge from and continue to be read in political contexts, and their writers cannot help but have views – explicit or implicit – on political issues like imperialism, racism, nationalism, democracy, but for critics to think that they can have direct access to those views without the mediation of the text's literary language and structure playing any significant role is to deny the relevance of the literary to the consideration and discussion of cultural issues. One may disagree with Eliot's views in the abstract on political questions such as colonization, cosmopolitanism, the working class, Jewish nationhood, the need for nations to have a sense of corporate identity, but on all of these issues the literary context through which these views are mediated brings into play contrary arguments, ambiguities, moral dilemmas, the impossibility of dissociating political ideas from rhetoric, which challenge simplistic judgements of her and her work.