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Eliot and Derrida: An Elective Affinity?*

I

As this study has suggested, George Eliot has been a problematic writer for modern criticism. Critics with quite disparate perspectives – such as New Critics, Marxists, post-structuralists, feminists and post-colonial critics – have seen her fiction as incoherent or contradictory in various respects. Terry Eagleton in his most obviously Marxist phase saw numerous ideological contradictions in her work, with *Middlemarch* being subject to an ‘ethical reduction of history’ through the “‘solution” of self sacrifice’ which is ‘ideologically insufficient’, while *Daniel Deronda* ‘is driven to the desperate recourse of adopting a mystical epistemology to resolve its problems’.¹ Post-structuralist-influenced critics such as Colin MacCabe and Catherine Belsey have equated Eliot’s fiction with the ‘classic realist text’ in which narration problematically operates as a metalanguage which ‘refuses to acknowledge its own status as writing’, so that ‘the narration functions simply as a window on reality’.² Many feminist critics have seen a contradiction between her self-realization as both writer and woman and the fact that her major female characters are either tragic figures or have to settle for limited lives, which leads Elaine Showalter to refer to ‘the pattern of self-sacrificing masochism in Eliot’.³ In the last few decades, as discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, the most negative commentary has come from post-colonial critics who have mounted a particularly severe attack, claiming that – despite Eliot’s links with liberal and progressive ideas – in her final two works there is complicity with imperialism, colonialism and even racism. Though I have argued that such critiques are very much open to question, the extent of negative criticism and the recurrent accusation of contradiction suggest that the mental attitude or orientation that propels her writing is one that critics from various schools have had difficulty coming to terms with or even comprehending so that her work has been judged in accordance with criteria that her writing may destabilize from the start. In this chapter I shall consider why critics have tended not to grasp Eliot’s mode of thinking and consequently her writing, particularly its political and ethical aspects.

One modern critical school, however, has tended to adopt a more positive point of view in regard to Eliot’s work. During the heyday of deconstruction, *Middlemarch* in particular was seen as having proto-Derridean aspects,⁴ but that has done little to undermine the criticism directed at her and her work by post-colonialists, Marxists and feminists. I shall argue, however, that the

accusations of contradiction that characterizes much of the negative criticism of her work can be countered by exploring further the connections between her mode of thinking and that of Jacques Derrida, especially her links with the later Derrida in which the main emphasis is on rethinking the political and the ethical, and argue that recognizing a proto-Derridean dimension in her writing calls into question especially accusations of complicity with imperialism or colonialism and social conservatism in general.

A general link between Eliot and Derrida is that though both have strong connections with a tradition of Enlightenment thought, they distance themselves from it in significant respects. Eliot furthered rationalist critique of religion and metaphysics generally through her translations of Strauss and Feuerbach, but perhaps her strongest intellectual sympathy was with Spinoza – also translated by her though her translations were not published in her lifetime – whose relationship to the Enlightenment is complex as is acknowledged in his being seen as part of the ‘radical Enlightenment’.⁵ Although she strongly supported science and rational inquiry in her essays and had no doubts about the validity of Darwin’s theory of natural selection in scientific terms, she refused to condemn or attack religion. Her scathing critique of Dr Cumming’s form of religion in her essay of 1855, ‘Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming’, was partly because ‘[t]here is not the slightest leaning towards mysticism in his Christianity’,⁶ and similarly with her response to Darwin: ‘to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that underlies the processes’ (*Letters*, III, 227). Some critics have thought that this apparent lack of enthusiasm indicates doubts about the theory, wrongly I think, but it could be argued that this view of her remark suggests dismay among certain of her critics that she is less strongly committed to scientific rationalism than they think she should be.

Derrida, likewise, has strong connections with an Enlightenment tradition of thought, and Christopher Norris in particular has emphasized this in various discussions of his work in which he attacks attempts to equate Derrida’s earlier writing with postmodern scepticism. But even Norris has to acknowledge the difficulties of maintaining Derrida’s Enlightenment credentials. The essay ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy’, Norris found particularly problematic, admitting that it was ‘extremely resistant to ... my kind of reading’,⁷ whereas John D. Caputo, a critic much more favourably disposed to Derrida’s later writings, welcomes it and sees it as ‘a provocative delimitation of his relationship to the Enlightenment, an unsettling settling of accounts with modernity’.⁸ *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ are somewhat equivalent to Derrida’s essay for Eliot’s critics, since these texts apparently flirt with mystical and apocalyptic ideas that seem to break with her earlier thinking and writing.

The radical viewpoint of post-colonial and other political critics of Eliot who have criticized *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ tends

to be grounded in Enlightenment rationalism and values such as equality and social emancipation: 'For a writer who might be expected to support a more rationalist version of religion ... *Daniel Deronda*'s mystical Judaism is an anomaly.'⁹ 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' has been particularly associated with reactionary conservatism, one critic referring to 'her embrace of nationalism, racialism and patriarchy' and claiming that 'she settles in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" on the argument that preservation of racial separateness ... is the goal to be pursued'.¹⁰ Another commentator asserts that the essay is 'virtually a compendium of the nineteenth-century conservative politics of inheritance and tradition'.¹¹ Derrida responded to Habermas's accusations that he was indifferent to such Enlightenment ideals as reason and emancipation – for example, reducing logic to rhetoric¹² – by claiming that such views arose out of a failure to read him adequately. I shall argue that a failure to read Eliot adequately has led to her being unpersuasively branded as a right-wing and anti-Enlightenment thinker.

Eliot's political critics tend to apply a logic of 'either/or' in their judgements of her position on such issues as colonialism and imperialism. As with Derrida, I shall suggest that her thinking is non-oppositional and so does not operate in terms of a logic of 'either/or', with the result that forms of thinking founded upon 'either/or' are destabilized in her writing. Derrida's break with such a logic has been seen as the starting point of his 'deconstruction' of 'Western metaphysics' in his critique of Husserl's phenomenology and its foundational concept that there is a basic opposition in speech between 'indications' and 'expressions'. For Derrida 'indications' and 'expressions' cannot be kept separate from each other as categories, and his work as a whole aims not only to show that all such fundamental oppositions can be deconstructed but also that political or philosophical positions based on them will tend to have a problematic outcome for both sides: 'In philosophy as elsewhere, Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism are symptoms of a missionary, colonial culture.'¹³ A Derridean concept related to the destabilization of the logic of 'either/or' is 'undecidability', and I shall suggest that this can be usefully employed in discussing Eliot's mode of thought, especially in relation to political and ethical issues.

Though 'undecidability' is a major feature of Derrida's writing from the start, as it emerges from his continual undermining of dualisms, in his later work it is strongly focused on the problem of decision-making in itself. This change of emphasis reflects the influence of Kierkegaard and his idea of the 'leap of faith', which Derrida discusses at length in *The Gift of Death*. As Derrida repeatedly argues, 'undecidability' is not being unable to decide but having to decide in a context in which there are considerations which cannot be resolved in any simple sense. If there were no undecidability and choice was utterly clear cut there would be no need for decisions since decision-making would merely be mechanically generated. Also one cannot know for sure the

consequences of making a decision; yet consequences cannot be left out of account in judging the rightness of decisions, and to be human is continually to be confronted by undecidability and the need to decide. No decision can be completely grounded in rationality, and one can never be sure that any decision one takes will be the right one.¹⁴

Eliot's political critics align her with imperialism and colonialism even though she distances herself from these at certain points in her writing, but her critics either ignore this or see her thought as merely confused or self-contradictory. A significant difference between her and her political critics is that while they tend to see colonialism and colonization as interchangeable or aspects of the same thing, in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' they are not identified with each other, despite their obvious affinity. Whereas colonialism in the modern era is treated in negative terms by her, there is no such clear-cut judgement in relation to colonization as such. Yet the text makes it clear that colonization, like colonialism, almost invariably involves conflict with existing inhabitants. It is explicitly stated that colonization has certainly led to the replacement of peoples, even to genocide. As well as referring to Britons being 'massacred' by invading Anglo-Saxon colonizers, Theophrastus also points out that the descendants of these Anglo-Saxon colonizers, the new British, were 'able, if [they] liked, to exterminate' (*ITS*, 146) the 'Red Indians' in the colonization of America. The language would appear to indicate that colonization is beyond any moral justification; yet this seems to be in contradiction with Theophrastus's later claim that the English, descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, have become a 'great historic people' (*ITS*, 158). But what for Eliot's critics looks like contradiction is for her an aporia. Whereas for Eliot's political critics it is taken for granted that with both colonialism and colonization there is a fundamental division in categorial terms between the 'indigenous' or 'native' people and the colonizers, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' suggests there can be no absolute distinction between colonizers and colonized. Underlying Eliot's view of colonization is the idea that there are no completely 'indigenous' or 'native' peoples (possibly the Bushmen, mentioned in *Daniel Deronda*, may be the closest) since virtually all human beings on earth are descended from migrating peoples or ex-colonizers.¹⁵ This is clear when Theophrastus points out that the Israelites who journeyed to the promised land of Canaan were colonizers and not different fundamentally from the Anglo-Saxons in that respect: 'There is more likeness than contrast between the way we English got our island and the way the Israelites got Canaan' (*ITS*, 150). In other words colonization goes all the way down, and colonizers can eventually become accepted and perceived as 'indigenous' or 'native' peoples. This problematizes any judgement on colonization.

The 'both/and' nature of Eliot's thinking is apparent in the view expressed by Theophrastus that the existing inhabitants of a country (in the case of England the descendants of invaders who drove out and displaced the previous

inhabitants) have the right to identify with the country their ancestors colonized and defend it against new invaders or new colonizers:

A people having the seed of worthiness in it must feel an answering thrill when it is adjured by the deaths of its heroes who died to preserve its national existence ... Nations so moved will resist conquest with the very breasts of their women, will pay their millions and their blood to abolish slavery, will share privation in famine and all calamity. (*ITS*, 146–7)

No doubt post-colonial critics might argue that there is an implication here that not all peoples have the right to resist invasion, only those having ‘the seed of worthiness’. One has to remember, as discussed in Chapter 11, that Theophrastus should not be identified with Eliot and is using language rhetorically as a means of persuading his Victorian readership to his point of view, but there is little evidence from Eliot’s writing as a whole that she viewed certain peoples as intrinsically inferior and thus having no right to resist colonization. Cultural relativism ran deep in her. Her verse drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*, sympathizes both with the Gypsies’ aspiration to nationhood and with their resistance to Spanish imperialism. Theophrastus later links prejudice against the Irish and black people with prejudice against Jews and feels shamed by English advertisements stating ‘No Irish need apply’ (*ITS*, 155). In *Daniel Deronda*, Deronda himself in discussing the revival of nations looks forward to ‘a great outburst of force in the Arabs, who are inspired with a new zeal’ (*DD*, 448).

Yet at the same time as supporting in regard to England the ‘fiery resolve to resist invasion’ even if only with ‘an improvised array of pitchforks’ (*ITS*, 160), Theophrastus advocates the restoration of a Jewish state in Palestine, which will clearly entail colonization and at the very least some displacement of the existing Arab inhabitants of Palestine. One of the major lines of attack on Eliot by her political critics has been that she ignored the Arab population of Palestine in her proto-Zionist support for a Jewish nation, but it is simplistic to draw the conclusion that because there is no explicit discussion of the existing inhabitants of Palestine in either *Daniel Deronda* or ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ that Eliot would have believed that Palestine was ‘an empty territory’ or had ‘total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of the East, Palestine in particular’, as Said has argued.¹⁶ Theophrastus’s references to the Anglo-Saxon invasion of England and to British colonization of America show that Eliot is all too aware that colonization almost inevitably leads to conflict. Eliot’s logic of ‘both/and’ implies that just as the modern British ought to resist invaders or colonizers, so the ancient Britons were justified in their resistance to the Anglo-Saxons and the ‘Red Indians’ likewise in opposing European colonization. Thus by extension the existing population of Palestine would have the moral right to resist modern Jewish colonizers. For Eliot an ethically absolute position on colonization is impossible. Migration and colonization

are facts of history, and existing peoples have been eliminated, driven out, subjugated and new nations formed in a continual cycle. Colonization is an undecidable issue if viewed in the abstract with historical distance, and there may be no necessity to decide in favour of either colonized or colonizers: one can both sympathize with the invaded ancient Britons and also accept that a 'great' English nation eventually emerged. But in terms of colonization in the modern world, the logic of 'both/and' will create undecidability in the Derridean sense of having to take a decision with no assurance that it will be the right one, as in Palestine where there is a conflict of interests between the existing majority Arab population and the claims of Jews who can have a nation of their own only by colonizing the land of their ancestors. Derrida has called such an experience of the undecidable 'a terrible and tragic situation in which to find oneself'.¹⁷ Eliot's political critics, however, ignore undecidability and see Eliot's support for colonization of Palestine by European Jews as expressed in *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as evidence merely of an imperialist and racist ideology on her part.¹⁸

Eliot's lack of sympathy with imperialism and colonialism is shown in the following comment by Theophrastus: 'That any people at once distinct and coherent enough to form a state should be held in subjection by an alien antipathetic government has been becoming more and more a ground of sympathetic indignation' (*ITS*, 160). Colonialism, of course, may entail colonization to varying degrees, but the difference between the two is that in colonialism the colonialist state remains the centre and its aim is to exploit the subjugated country for the economic benefit of the dominating country, whereas colonization involves large numbers of people settling permanently in another country because for various reasons – such as religious persecution or poverty – they decide to leave the land they were born in. America illustrates the distinction: it was a British colonial possession and also initially colonized predominantly by the British, many of whom were antagonistic to Britain and had left to start a new life in America, never intending to return to Britain. Eventually, of course, these colonists rebelled against the colonial power and created their own nation. Clearly the relationship between Britain and India was fundamentally different: India could not be colonized by British immigrants in the way that America was, and in any case few of the British who went to India intended to settle permanently there. Eliot's opposition to British colonialism in India, even to the extent of sympathizing with the Indian Mutiny, is clear from Theophrastus's ironic comments on British colonial policy there:

The Hindoos also have doubtless had their rancours against us and still entertain enough ill-will to make unfavourable remarks on our character, especially as to our historic rapacity and arrogant notions of our own superiority; they perhaps do not admire the usual English profile, and they are not converted to our way of feeding: but though we are a small number of an alien race profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people, they are unable to turn us out;

at least, when they tried we showed them their mistake. We do not call ourselves a dispersed and a punished people: we are a colonising people, and it is we who have punished others. (*ITS*, 146)

Theophrastus is equally hostile to British imperialist policy in China, especially in regard to the opium trade. Though one's own country and its culture should be at the centre of one's feelings, this does not justify exploiting the Chinese or seeing them as inferior: 'I am not bound to demoralise him [the Chinaman] with opium ... [or] to insult him for his want of my tailoring and religion when he appears as a peaceable visitor on the London pavement' (*ITS*, 147).

Eliot's critics do not take sufficient account of the distinction she sees between modern colonialism and colonization. Given that colonization is undecidable there is not an intrinsic contradiction between *Deronda's* hailing of America as a 'great'¹⁹ new nation – the product of colonization – and Theophrastus's acknowledgement of the cost for the displaced 'Red Indian' people. Though in favour of Jewish colonization of land occupied mainly by Arabs in Palestine, Eliot's support is dependent on such colonization being distinct from colonialism. In the last sentence of the quotation on British colonial policy in India, a contrast is created between 'a colonising people', such as the British, and 'a dispersed and punished people', and clearly the latter description applies most obviously to the Jews. Though at the time she was writing *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus* Such colonialism and imperialism had become political ideologies and it was difficult to see colonization as existing independently of them as one can argue that it did in earlier eras, the Jews were for her a special case, having an ancestral connection with Palestine and subject to oppression in varying degrees in the countries in which they have settled. Apart from the Jewish situation in relation to Palestine there is no sign of support for colonization in general in the modern world in Eliot's writing.²⁰ Yet being aware of what colonization may entail, and knowing there can be no certainty as to the consequences, Eliot in advocating Jewish nationhood through colonization will necessarily encounter Derrida's claim that having to decide is 'a terrible and tragic situation in which to find oneself'.

Theophrastus, however, urges his readers to consider the question as to whether conditions may be right for restoring Jewish nationhood in Palestine. Although it could be argued that Palestine was not a 'nation' – being a colony of the Ottoman Empire – at least as conventionally understood, any more than America or pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain were nations before colonization, this would not have provided justification for colonization for Eliot since her view of what constitutes a nation is not sovereignty or shared racial origins but the 'living force of sentiment in common which makes a national consciousness' (*ITS*, 147). Since those who are threatened with colonization are justified in resisting, this must apply as much to the inhabitants of Palestine as to the ancient Britons or the 'Red Indians', for the 'both/and' logic of Eliot's position in relation to colonization is that though her choice is the Jews, she cannot

deny the Arab inhabitants of Palestine the right to resist, though to articulate that directly in an essay aimed at winning support from English readers for a Jewish nation in Palestine would almost certainly have led to incomprehension on the part of such readers. It is not surprising therefore that there is no explicit mention of the existing Arab population, but I would argue that it is not absent but implicitly present.

Though it is clear from both *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' that Eliot decides to support the Jews, there is some indication of the difficulties of such a decision when Theophrastus alludes to the need to seek some compromise between contrary positions if possible when he refers to the problem of 'opposite claims' which creates the 'human task' of their 'discerning and adjustment' (*ITS*, 160–1). But the root of decision for Eliot in this context of undecidability is that though the majority Arab inhabitants of Palestine may be the likely losers if a Jewish nation is created, without their own state the Jews would be likely losers, and it is inevitable that there will be losers in history. Of course, much of the political criticism directed at Eliot is based on the apparently never-ending conflict in the Middle East as a result of the founding of the state of Israel, though it can be argued that it is absurd to suggest that Eliot should have foreseen such a situation, as this would imply that she should also have foreseen the myriad events that have contributed to the present-day impasse in Palestine. But in deciding to support proto-Zionism in her writing Eliot would surely have been aware she was taking a risk, since the effects of decisions and the actions they lead to are unforeseeable. As Mr Irwine in *Adam Bede* remarks, 'the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it' (*AB*, 422).

Derrida himself also seems to have seen Zionism as an undecidable issue that nevertheless requires that one decide. His own position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been attacked as incoherent and inconsistent. Though he expressed support for Palestinian resistance to Israel he also supported Israel's right to be recognized as a nation: '[its] existence, it goes without saying, must henceforth be recognised by all.'²¹ Yet Israel was created by European Jews colonizing Palestine, and Derrida's opposition in principle to colonialism in general is apparent throughout his writing on political questions. Whereas Eliot supported a Jewish state before the event, Derrida supports it after the event. However, one should recognize the difference between these positions. If Derrida had been in Eliot's position in the 1870s, in that context he may have decided against proto-Zionism like those Jews in Chapter 42 of *Daniel Deronda* who reject Mordecai's ideal of Jewish nationhood in favour of assimilation. In the 1870s Eliot had to decide on the issue but with no certainty as to whether her decision would turn out to be justifiable, and would she have changed her mind if she could have foreseen the future? But once a Jewish state had been created the situation of course changes. Although Derrida

was critical of Israeli policies, it seems clear that supporting the dissolution of Israel as a nation, despite the fact that European colonization was central to its creation, was for him untenable. Eliot likewise accepted the right of England and America to exist as nations even though they were the product of colonizations that involved at the extreme massacre and extermination of the existing inhabitants. As I have argued there is no intrinsic contradiction in either Eliot's or Derrida's positions on Jewish nationhood given their anti-dualistic thinking, but for critics committed to a logic of 'either/or' they are inevitably open to accusations of inconsistency and incoherence.

II

Despite the affinities that exist between Eliot and Derrida in relation to their political thinking, it could be argued that a major difference between the two is that whereas Eliot favours the idea of nationality and believes in the value of a people sharing memories and traditions, Derrida is antagonistic towards nationalism and distrusts the term 'community', which for him tends to exclude or offer little place for the 'other'. Eliot may appear to have stronger links with Heidegger's concept of *Versammlung* or gathering, which Derrida has been critical of. Yet 'both/and' again comes into play as Derrida admits that 'gathering' cannot be wholly discarded:

I think we do not have to choose between unity and multiplicity ... What disrupts the totality is the condition for the relation to the other ... Of course, we need unity, some gathering, some configuration ... What interests me is the limit of every attempt to totalize, to gather, *versammeln* ... the limit of this unifying, uniting movement, the limit that it had to encounter, because the relationship of the unity to itself implies some difference.²²

John D. Caputo, perhaps the leading commentator on the later Derrida, writes,

Derrida does not renounce the idea of cultural identity – one is French or American, speaks a particular language, has a certain citizenship, operates within certain cultural practices – but wants such identity to be internally differentiated, so that it is *not* identical with oneself, so marked by a 'difference with itself' that the very idea of 'we' is destabilized... 'We' all require 'culture', but let us cultivate (*colere*) a culture of self-differentiation, of differing with itself, where 'identity' is an effect of difference, rather than cultivating 'colonies' (also from *colere*) of the same in a culture of identity which gathers itself to itself in common defense against the other.²³

Eliot's concept of nationality can be seen as similarly 'internally differentiated'. 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' makes it clear that the English nation is made up of diverse elements, having been subject to several invasions and colonizations as well as continually absorbing immigrants. Although Deronda acquires

Jewish identity, he claims that Englishness and Christianity will remain part of him, as he tells Mordecai: 'Don't ask me to deny my spiritual parentage' (*DD*, 643). The Jews also, despite the general assumption of non-Jews that they have a uniform racial identity, have the most differentiated identity of any people since they are dispersed over the world and have inevitably incorporated elements, both racial and cultural, of the nations within which they have lived. Yet those Jews who respect their religion, culture and traditions have resisted the destabilizing effects of assimilation or cosmopolitanism. Thus they are a lesson both to little Englanders who see Englishness in terms of a uniform identity and to those English who resort to 'debasing the moral currency' through mockery and ridicule, discussed in the essay of the same name in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*.

'Hospitality' is a key concept in the social and political thinking of both Eliot and the later Derrida, and it is integral to Derrida's concept of 'justice' and the 'gift'. It underlies Eliot's concept of a nation's responsibility towards immigrants or those seeking a haven from persecution. Theophrastus declares, 'Are we to tear the glorious flag of hospitality which has made our freedom the world-wide blessing of the oppressed?' (*ITS*, 159). For both, hospitality does not mean equality between the host and the guest since the condition of being a host entails both difference between them and the host retaining control. But Derrida argues, in contrast to Kant, that hospitality is ideally 'unconditional': it 'implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back ... you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation ... The other, like the Messiah, must arrive whenever he or she wants. She may not even arrive'.²⁴ However, though the other is a guest and there is entitlement to shelter, the guest can be expelled and has no right to share the host's wealth or possessions. Yet the host-guest relationship necessarily leads to disruption of unity and totality as embodied in the host through engaging with and confronting the other and difference as embodied in the guest. Although Derrida recognizes that putting hospitality into practice will inevitably introduce conditions, unconditional hospitality must remain the ideal and not be compromised, which associates it with the messianic, a key concept for the later Derrida and another major affinity between him and Eliot.

Derrida's essay on cosmopolitanism is relevant to the concept of 'hospitality', and it has particular connections with 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as both are written in a context of fear of 'great historic peoples', to use Eliot's phrase, being swamped by immigrants: 'This was a particularly dark year for France's reputation as a place of hospitality and refuge from oppression, with the clumsy and violent imposition of the Debret laws on immigrants and those without rights of residence.'²⁵ Derrida views the migrant or refugee as a guest in the 'host country'²⁶ and rejects the view that asylum should be accorded only to those who will not benefit in economic terms. He accepts that there are dangers in accepting the other or newcomer as guest as there will be a tension between

the ideal of unconditional hospitality and hospitality in practice. The latter implies that the 'host remains the master in the house, the country, the nation, he controls the threshold, he controls the borders, and when he welcomes the guest he wants to keep the mastery'; in contrast for 'unconditional hospitality to take place you have to take the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone ... Those are the risks involved in pure hospitality, if there is such a thing and I am not sure that there is'.²⁷ Inevitably there is an aporia in that true hospitality which must be unconditional to be ethical will be compromised when conditions come into play, as they must. Theophrastus likewise refuses to deny the right of asylum to 'wealth-acquiring immigrants' and accepts that the guest may be unpleasant and even dangerous from the point of view of the host, since immigrants' appreciation 'of our political and social life must often be as approximative or fatally erroneous as their delivery of our language' (*ITS*, 159) and urges that steps be taken to moderate the effects of that. For both Derrida and Eliot pragmatic considerations – 'the process ... political action, rhetoric, strategies, etc.'²⁸ – are thus unavoidable, introducing some conditionality.

'Process' or relations of power, both in terms of the microcosm and the macrocosm, with their inevitable 'modalities of violence', to use a phrase of Derrida's, are ubiquitous in Eliot's fiction, and the link between microcosm and macrocosm is spelled out in *Daniel Deronda* with imagery associated with colonialism and empire being applied to male–female relationships, particularly of course the Gwendolen–Grandcourt marriage. Many of Eliot's critics, however, especially those committed to Enlightenment values or radical politics, most obviously feminists, Marxists and post-colonialists, have been troubled by the apparent lack of any emancipatory dimension in her fiction. There is no indication of how the subjugated, whether they are women or the working class or subject peoples, can break free of their yokes. She appears to be sceptical of political solutions, thus her distancing herself from the radical ideas of contemporaries, such as the feminist Barbara Bodichon, the socialist Edith Simcox and the Comtean Frederic Harrison. What critics have failed to consider or been embarrassed by in Eliot is the messianic aspect of her later writing.²⁹ For admirers of Derrida's earlier writings, the stress on the messianic in his later writings has also been problematic. Even critics of his early work for being apolitical or the ultimate in scepticism and subversion did not expect the political to emerge in the context of messianism. Derrida's turn towards the messianic, however, perhaps helps to create a new context in which to consider the political aspect of Eliot's final two works, particularly in relation to the Enlightenment and its ideal of emancipation. For both writers, the messianic – which Derrida identifies with the *à venir* or the 'to come' – is emancipatory. He writes,

What remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism,

a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice – which we may distinguish from law or right or even human rights – and an idea of democracy – which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today.³⁰

The messianic is clearly central to *Daniel Deronda* – being an intrinsic part of Mordecai's Jewish mysticism – but critics generally have not noticed messianic intimations in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' Theophrastus writes,

A common humanity is *not yet* enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes the complete man. The time is *not come* for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. (*ITS*, 147, emphasis added)

Theophrastus does not rule out that all of these may be 'to come' and does not appear to reject them for being utopian. It may be messianic to contemplate such possibilities, but this is no reason to dismiss them. One is reminded of Derrida's discussion of 'come' at the end of 'On a Newly Risen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy' where he writes,

The event of this 'Come' precedes and calls the event. It would be that starting from which there is any event, the coming, the to-come of the event that cannot be thought under the given category of event ... In this *affirmative* tone, 'Come' marks in itself, in oneself, neither a desire nor an order, neither a prayer nor a request [*demande*]. More precisely, the grammatical, linguistic, or semantic categories from which the 'come' would thus be determined are traversed by the 'Come'.³¹

Similarly, the 'to come' is implied when Theophrastus states that 'it is a calamity to the English, as to any other great historic people, to undergo a *premature* fusion with immigrants of alien blood' (*ITS*, 158, emphasis added). Political criticism tends to see such a passage as racist, but the significance of 'premature' is ignored. Such fusion may be *premature* in the present, but in the future to come it may happen without conflict as a result of the 'fusion of races', which Theophrastus sees as 'impossible to arrest' (*ITS*, 160). Furthermore it is the '*too rapid* effacement' (*ITS*, 160, emphasis added) of traditions and customs that would be a bad thing, implying that their eventual effacement – and presumably replacement – is to be expected.

Of course, the major messianic dimension of Eliot's last two texts is the idea of the restoration of a Jewish nation in the future. When these texts were published this idea was generally seen, by both non-Jews and Jews, as so unlikely in terms of nineteenth-century political realities as to belong in the realm of 'dreams'.³² But the performative power of Eliot's representation of Mordecai's messianic idea is all too apparent now, bearing out Deronda's contention that the future can confound rationalist assumptions or predictions about it: 'A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life' (*DD*, 448). A reviewer of *Daniel Deronda* in 1876 said of it, as a criticism,

that it 'may be defined as a religious novel without a religion'.³³ That points to perhaps one of the fundamental links between Eliot and Derrida and the relationship of their thought to the messianic. Both apparently atheists – Derrida wrote, 'I rightly pass for an atheist'³⁴ and according to F. W. H. Myers, Eliot said that God was 'inconceivable' – they nevertheless attached the highest value to religion, especially in its messianic aspect, and neither had any interest in debunking it: 'I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism left in me ... I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now' (*Letters*, IV, 64–5). For both, Judaism, in either its orthodox or mystical aspect, is particularly significant because the Messiah is still to come. Perhaps the major appeal of the messianic for both is that without it the incommensurability between justice or ethics or hospitality and actual conditions in the world appears to be unbridgeable. Such incommensurability can induce scepticism or hopelessness or the nihilism that one sees in certain of Eliot's characters, notably Tito Melema in *Romola*. The value of the messianic, though as Derrida emphasizes it is the messianic divorced from its traditional theological content, is that it is a projection beyond that incommensurability into the future 'to come'. Derrida has associated messianicity or messianism without religion with radical emancipatory politics such as antiglobalization movements and hope for 'the democracy to come'. Eliot's work can be linked with that as one sees with Mordecai when he takes the messianic vision of the restoration of Israel to even greater heights:

Let the torch of visible community be lit! Let the reason of Israel disclose itself in a great outward deed, and let there be another great migration ... Will any say 'It cannot be?' ... The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign ... Let us ... help to will our own better future and the better future of the world ... claim the brotherhood of our nation, and carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles. The vision is there; it will be fulfilled. (*DD*, 457, 459)

However, if messianic hopes and aspirations are actually achieved, then problems inevitably arise, and clearly the coming into being of Mordecai's messianic vision of the restoration of a Jewish nation in Palestine has given modern readers of Eliot who cannot avoid reading *Daniel Deronda* and 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' in the context of the current situation in the Middle East some pause for thought. This lies at the root of many of the accusations of complicity with imperialism and colonialism that have been directed at her by recent critics. Mordecai's optimistic but limited interpretation of the story of the Gentile king and the Jewish maiden in Chapter 61 of *Daniel Deronda* certainly suggests Eliot's awareness that the messianic idealist will tend to edit out the ambiguities of the real world. But for Eliot (and Derrida) without the messianic there is no hope of aspiring beyond the contradictions, conflicts

and inequalities of the present and working towards something better in the future. The epigraph to the novel shows that Eliot is as aware of the human potential for corruption as writers like Conrad, and one can see the invoking of the messianic as a way of countering the pessimism that may induce. It provides hope for the future and creates ideals that can shape human action, but this non-theological messianism – ‘a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation’ that can create the promise of a ‘new Enlightenment for the century to come’³⁵ – will not be any the less vulnerable to human egotism, politics and the facts of history than religious messianisms of the past. Significantly Derrida has confessed that though he would like the Messiah to come ‘for that would be justice, peace, and revolution ... at the same time I am scared ... I would like the coming of the Messiah to be infinitely postponed’.³⁶ Perhaps it is safer for a writer to conjure up messianic expectation in a negative form, as with Yeats in ‘The Second Coming’ or to hope like Derrida that it will be infinitely postponed. But the fulfilment of the messianic vision will always be deferred for as soon as it appears to be achieved the ambiguities of the world come along at the same time so that it again has to be projected into the future to come, as the apparent achievement of Mordecai’s messianic vision of a Jewish nation in the future indicates. Although Christ may be the Messiah for Christians, he has to come again and this second coming is still awaited. In the current situation in the Middle East it might seem that it is impossible to solve the problem of ‘opposite claims’, but when Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda* and ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ a Jewish state in Palestine also seemed beyond the bounds of possibility. The ghost of Eliot might argue that if the latter could happen why not the former, so that a second manifestation of the messianic is now awaited.

III

If there are affinities between Eliot and Derrida in regard to the political aspects of their writing, is this also the case with the other major concern of the later Derrida, the ethical, for clearly there is considerable overlap between the political and the ethical in Derrida’s writings? Morality is generally regarded as being at the centre of Eliot’s writing; indeed it has often been accused of being excessively moralistic since it is seen as being governed by a firm set of moral principles, based on Christian humanism, which her fiction promotes and applies. The severest critic of her moralism was Nietzsche when he attacked her for ‘cling[ing] all the more firmly to Christian morality’ despite rejecting the Christian god: ‘When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality.’³⁷ But Eliot’s affiliations with Derrida raise doubts as to whether her fiction should be seen in such terms. I shall suggest that her major concern is with the ethical in a proto-Derridean sense

rather than with the promotion and application of general moral principles or a set of moral norms.

The increasing emphasis in Derrida's later writing on the ethical – something that was not obvious to most commentators in his earlier writings, which were often attacked as leading to moral relativism and scepticism – has been linked to his continuing preoccupation with Levinas's philosophy with its predominant focus on the idea of the 'other'. However, an obvious difference between Eliot and Derrida and Levinas in regard to the ethical is that discussion operates at a high level of abstraction in Derrida's and especially Levinas's texts, with little application to concrete human situations, while in Eliot the emphasis is very much on the latter. Despite that basic difference, the concept of the ethical that emerges in her fiction, I shall argue, has similarities to that of Levinas and especially Derrida.

Undecidability is as crucial to the links between Eliot and Derrida in relation to the ethical as it is to the political. Derrida's best-known illustration of undecidability is in his discussion of Hamlet's dilemma in *Spectres of Marx*, which he summarized later in an interview: 'In the case of Hamlet ... the responsibility in front of his father's call, for it to be a responsibility, demands that choices be made ... So the son has to make a decision ... as a finite being he has to select within the heritage and that is again the question of undecidability.'³⁸ For Derrida decisions and the acts they generate will advance into an unknowable future and thus have the potential to return, ghost-like, to haunt the decider. Undecidability is also a recurrent feature of Eliot's fiction, with characters confronted by situations which call for choices that will haunt them no matter what they decide to do. Critics of Eliot have generally been unsympathetic to this aspect of her work, often seeing her as mired in self-contradiction, or vacillation or succumbing to conventional morality. This is especially so in regard to one of the most notable examples of undecidability in her fiction: in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver, after her inadvertent elopement with Stephen Guest (both she and Guest having commitments to other partners), has to decide between 'follow[ing] our strongest feeling [and] the ties that have made others dependent on us'. If she chose the former she claims she 'would be haunted by the suffering I had caused' (MF, 449–50), but others as well as herself will suffer no matter what she decides and she cannot know whether the consequences of returning home will be better or worse than if she decided to elope to the continent with Guest, whose opposing argument urging the self's claims over those of others – 'Would they have thanked us for anything so hollow as constancy without love?... You can't save them from pain now; you can only tear yourself from me, and make my life worthless to me' (MF, 475–6) – is not refuted. That many critics have attacked Maggie's choice on various grounds is an indication of a fundamental resistance to undecidability as a concept, since they are reluctant to recognize that there is no absolutely right decision in this context. Yet Maggie has to

decide, which makes her situation a tragic one. Derrida equates the necessity of making decisions in such contexts with the tragic, as his discussion of *Hamlet* shows, though for both Eliot and him the moment of decision moves beyond the rational: Maggie in leaving Stephen 'was not conscious of a decision ... it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention' (MF, 479).

In *Romola* Eliot actually uses the word 'ghost' in the context of Tito Melema's decision to abandon his benefactor and adopted father, Baldassarre. The painter Piero di Cosima, in sketching Tito, detects ghostly fear in Tito's countenance even though at this time there is no apparent threat:

He saw himself with his right hand uplifted, holding a wine-cup, in the attitude of triumphant joy, but with his face turned away from the cup with an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being thrown into sympathy with his imaged self.

'You are beginning to look like it already,' said Piero, with a short laugh, moving the picture away again. 'He's seeing a ghost – that fine young man. I shall finish it some day, when I've settled what sort of ghost is the most terrible – whether it should look solid, like a dead man come to life, or half transparent, like a mist'. (R, 180)

Tito is generally seen as one of Eliot's 'villains', and therefore his selfish decision may seem to have no connection with undecidability. Yet even he has to go through a process of deciding before choosing not to act to save Baldassarre, and among his reasons are the low chance of success and, later, moral scepticism and the utilitarian – or more exactly – Benthamite³⁹ argument that the pleasure not only of himself but of others would be the greater if he kept Baldassarre's gems for himself rather than using them to buy freedom for his benefactor, thus denying that the self has any responsibility to a specific other, whom the self can reason out of existence:

He had once said that on a fair assurance of his father's existence and whereabouts, he would unhesitatingly go after him. But, after all, *why* was he bound to go? What, looked at closely, was the end of all life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure? And was not his own blooming life a promise of incomparably more pleasure, not for himself only, but for others, than the withered wintry life of a man who was past the time of keen enjoyment, and whose ideas had stiffened into barren rigidity? (R, 111)

For Eliot, a major factor contributing to what Derrida calls 'the ordeal of undecidability'⁴⁰ is that total disinterestedness is impossible and those making decisions, even if they are at the opposite moral pole from Tito and strive to act without selfishness, can never eliminate completely self-interest or partiality or prejudice, thus the potential for being haunted by the future consequences of actions that cannot be anticipated. This is a recurrent idea in her fiction: 'But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds

never; they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness' (R, 156).

Derrida follows Levinas in arguing that the self is nothing without an 'other' and that the other must be responded to without being reduced to sameness in the process, though Derrida does not seem to have rejected the qualification he makes of Levinas's view of the other in his early essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' when he claims that self and other cannot be kept totally separate: 'If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse.'⁴¹ Forms of human action and behaviour that aim completely to exclude the other are thus impossible, but an ethics that gives absolute priority to the other is also impossible. It is a critical commonplace that egotism is one of Eliot's deepest preoccupations, and though it may be sublimated it cannot be completely overcome, and if it could the self would be subject to dissolution. Her novels contain both characters who are ethical exclusivists who attempt to eliminate their own egotism in acting in the interests of others and also those who attempt to exclude the other completely in their pursuit of self-interest. Both attempts fail. Her critique of her many characters committed to extreme individualism is philosophical and proto-Derridean: the self not only is nothing without the other but the other is also within the self or mind.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Eliot is writing in a context in which the ethical is under attack as a result of Darwinism and the message that could be drawn from it, namely that the dynamic of the world is individual members of species acting purely for self-interest and survival in a world governed by the struggle for existence. The modern theory of 'the selfish gene' has added another dimension to this idea in order to overcome various apparent exceptions. Numerous commentators in the Victorian period warned that Darwinism was irreconcilable with morality as traditionally conceived, with the interests of others merely a threat to the interests of the self so that the self could justifiably dismiss them:

For assuredly the selfish man will seek, and justifiably, to evade or perform imperfectly his part in the moral contract, whenever he can with safety, and especially whenever his supposed interests come into collision with those of others. In short, with such an origin, virtue is effectually destroyed; and, indeed, vice not less; for there remains no essential or real distinction between them ... The human world that we imagined the only moral world becomes the most completely non-moral world, since man is the only animal that, having a conscience, is able to analyse it away, and thus escape from its authority.⁴²

Eliot's criticism of such ideas involves neither reasserting conventional moral certainties derived from Christian ethics nor manipulating her plots so that those who adopt such a Darwinian approach to life are arbitrarily punished or come to a bad end. For her as for Derrida, since the human ego cannot exclude the other, the ethical is intrinsic to the human situation and her fiction shows the dire effect of attempts to live beyond the scope of the

ethical, and fundamental to the implied critique of these characters is that their individualism is flawed at its root by the existence of language which makes it impossible to separate self and other. Because language and thought are shared, the idea of the other cannot be discarded from thought and consciousness. Language entails that in any human situation certain ideas, values, conventions circulate among people. She shows the human price of attempting to live on the basis of extreme self-sufficient individualism rather than merely condemning it in terms of an absolute set of moral principles. Even if such a way of life does not lead to disastrous results – though it does for Tito, Christian in *Felix Holt* and Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* survive and move on – its refusal to acknowledge responsibility to the other, which inevitably leads to the isolation and alienation of the self, is the main ground for Eliot's ethical critique.

Of course, Eliot has often been linked with 'altruism', the word having been coined by Auguste Comte, but it has not been regarded by many Eliot critics or commentators as having much philosophical or intellectual substance, as it can be argued that altruism begs the question as to why one has a moral obligation to act for the benefit of others, a problem, it is claimed, that Eliot does not convincingly confront:

George Eliot was amenable to Lewes's and Spencer's goal of founding ethics on science, and egoism and altruism are key terms in her work, but Lewes, Comte, and George Eliot run into the same stumbling block: they begin by *assuming* that certain traits are inherently moral. In her thought, sympathy and altruism are unquestioned goods, but in the end, she is unable to provide any but intuitive grounds for accepting this view.⁴³

The word 'altruism' is, of course, derived from combining the French *autrui* with the Latin, *alter*, meaning 'other'. Clearly Levinas's and Derrida's concept of the ethical as the relation to the other cannot be easily dismissed as lacking in philosophical substance, and as I have tried to show, there are some clear links with Eliot's form of altruism. For her as well as for Derrida, ethical decisions, in contrast to the view that they are determined by a pre-existing set of principles, must first go through 'the ordeal of undecidability' in order to be ethical at all, and of course this will necessarily bring the other into play. I would suggest that critics of Eliot in future should take account of her relationship to this alternative concept of the ethical rather than merely equating her commitment to altruism with a general humanism that is vulnerable to conventional philosophical critique.