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The Role of Luck in the Art, Ethics and Politics of *Daniel Deronda*

I

This final chapter brings together the main concerns of the previous chapters through focusing on luck in *Daniel Deronda*. The novel's preoccupation with luck shows particularly clearly how Eliot's writing fuses her intellectualism with her commitment to the novel as literature since luck is central both to the novel's thematics in the areas of philosophy, ethics, politics, and also to its artistic form, the open ending, for example, pointing to a future that is unpredictable and will be affected by luck. Luck also brings into play further critique both of applications of Darwinism to the self and society and of the Byronic tradition and its associations with egotism, pessimism, nihilism, in which luck is often cited as justification. Eliot's artistic aspiration is perhaps at its highest level in this novel, but there is an interesting awareness that literary success may also be dependent on luck, particularly if a work looks to influence or shape the future and therefore must trust to luck that it will be positively received by its readers in the future. Beginnings as well as endings are destabilized and opening *in medias res* is not only innovative in terms of the form of nineteenth-century fiction but also a philosophical recognition that origins can provide no secure grounding for thought or action. But in creating a connection with classical epic Eliot implicitly suggests (as Joyce was to do in *Ulysses*) that the novel as a literary form can compete with the greatest works of the past. A strong case can be made that *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's most ambitious literary undertaking since it has greater scope than any of her other novels, encompassing a wider range of social life and having a European dimension as well as an English one. There is also greater psychological depth in relation to the representation of character than in her previous novels, especially in the proto-Freudian characterization of Gwendolen Harleth. It is also her most resonant text from a twenty-first century point of view because of its pertinence to perhaps the most powerful currents of contemporary critical and cultural theory in which the prime focus is on such issues as identity, imperialism, colonialism, racism, which are subjects of interest in the novel. Though these have been discussed in previous chapters, they have connections with luck that allow them to be seen from another perspective.

Daniel Deronda is one of the few nineteenth-century classic novels that continues to be controversial, both artistically and ideologically. Certain critical objections, some of which date back to its original reception, persist and new ones have emerged. Whereas the English part has always been highly regarded, with Gwendolen Harleth and Grandcourt in particular praised as masterly psychological studies in Eliot's most powerful realist style, the main Jewish characters have been much criticized for being idealized, with the Jewish plot itself being seen as more in keeping with the romance genre than with realism. The claim that the novel is structurally problematic remains a critical issue. In a challenging critique, published as recently as 2002, Pauline Nestor is unconvinced by the efforts of defenders of the novel to establish its artistic unity,¹ maintaining that there is a 'split' in the text: 'At its simplest, Gwendolen Harleth inhabits a world of realism and determinism, while Daniel Deronda dwells in a space of epic and prophecy.'² Such negative critical comment in regard to literary form and structure has been greatly reinforced by political attacks, the novel's apparent support for proto-Zionism being particularly controversial.³ Some of these negative critical reactions can be countered if one takes luck into account.

The formal innovations in the novel especially highlight the role of luck. *Daniel Deronda* is fundamentally different in form and structure from Eliot's earlier novels in being set close to the time of writing and denying the reader stability in regard to the beginning and ending as well as disrupting conventional narrative movement through the use of flashback or analepsis. The epigraph to the first chapter asserts that all beginnings are 'make-believe' and claims that '[n]o retrospect will take us to the true beginning' (*DD*, 3), and the open ending leaves unresolved what will happen to the characters in the future, both personally and in terms of their hopes, a future conceived of as stretching well beyond the time of the novel's narration. Such an unresolved ending undermines the synchronic structure of the great majority of nineteenth-century narratives – often set well in the past – in which beginning, middle and end are known in advance and therefore tend to exist in a fixed and predictable relationship to each other. As the main characters in *Daniel Deronda* are left at a turning point in their lives with the reader having no secure knowledge about what the future will hold for them or their hopes, unpredictability is built into the novel's structure. This creates a context in which prophecy, chance, unexpected turns of event – all of which involve luck – can be brought into play with much greater force than in novels structured synchronically in which beginnings are not arbitrary or endings unresolved and consequently known before the narration starts. Much previous criticism of the Jewish plot, in particular for being dependent supposedly on coincidence and providential outcomes, has not sufficiently taken this into account.

The dominant form of realist narrative with its basis in probability and persuasive causality is thus destabilized, and this significantly affects how the

character is represented in relation to ethical questions, which are problematized when luck is brought into play. Instead of the emphasis being on how characters act and behave towards others in stable situations placed within a structure of events that have a definite end point, the focus shifts to consciousness⁴ and whether people can act ethically towards the other with any authenticity if they belong to different mental worlds with incommensurable perspectives on life which lead to actions or decisions whose outcomes cannot be known for certain. Since the consequence or the effect of taking decisions which affect both self and other cannot be foreseen, the ethical cannot necessarily be dissociated from luck and gambling, as I shall discuss with particular reference to Deronda himself and his relationship with Gwendolen Harleth.

The view that the major Jewish characters are idealized has generally prevented critics from accepting that they are not in any way different at a fundamental level from the major non-Jewish characters. Both Jewish and non-Jewish characters tend to occupy separate mental worlds and are significantly affected by luck, undermining the claim that the text is 'split'. In an exchange between Mordecai and Mirah at the end of Chapter 61 there is disagreement about how to interpret a story from the Midrash about a Jewish maiden's love for a Gentile king being so apparently selfless that she chooses to die in place of the woman whom the king loves: 'This is the surpassing love, that loses self in the object of love.' But Mirah disputes Mordecai's reading:

'You can make the story so in your mind, Ezra, because you are great, and like to fancy the greatest that could be. But I think it was not really like that. The Jewish girl must have had jealousy in her heart, and she wanted somehow to have the first place in the king's mind. That is what she would die for.'

'My sister, thou hast read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as indwelling demons, unmixed with the relenting and devout elements of the soul. Thou judgest by the plays, and not by thy own heart, which is like our mother's.'

Mirah made no answer. (*DD*, 629)

At this point in the novel, Mirah has become consumed by jealousy since she fears that Deronda loves Gwendolen. Mordecai reads Mirah, however, in the manner of numerous commentators – Nestor, for example, sees her as 'a type of perfect womanhood' and refers to her as 'saintly'⁵ – as the embodiment of such ideals as renunciation and purity of heart. But Mirah knows that Mordecai is misreading her. She is no longer the person who, in Chapter 32, was so secure in her identity as a Jewish woman that she had no problem accepting the subordinate role of women in the synagogue, which troubles Amy and Mab Meyrick. She now finds her racial identity under stress because of an overpowering love for a man she believes to be a Gentile. She keeps silent, however, as she realizes this would be disillusioning for Mordecai. The reader is put in a position to recognize that Mordecai's idealism has the effect of making him a poor reader of people and of literature. Not only is Mirah subject to

a corrosive jealousy and intensity of feeling that make her belong in a moral universe not intrinsically different from that of Gwendolen and Deronda's mother,⁶ but clearly Mordecai's idealism – and this may be representative of all forms of idealism – exists at a removal from reality, which means that though it can potentially change it, it is also at risk of being crushed by it.

This scene is one of the many examples in the novel of characters being alienated from each other because their mental worlds are irreconcilable: Mirah's mental world is governed at this point by her love for the seemingly Gentile Deronda and her jealousy of Gwendolen, while Mordecai's is governed by the ideal of Jewish nationhood and a concept of love – at least female love – as renunciation of self. The change that takes place in Mirah which leads her to experience a sense of disconnection from both her earlier self and from Mordecai could be interpreted as a negative form of alienation. However, it may be seen more positively as, at least in embryo, a form of alienation similar to that of Deronda, that is, one in which there is potential for productive mental distantiation. Though this is not developed in the novel in relation to Mirah, it may suggest that the marriage between her and Deronda will be one in which there will be greater compatibility and equality than might have appeared likely when she was a failed suicide and an unreflecting product of Judaism and her Jewish heritage.

Underlying the division between Mordecai and Mirah are the different forms of their dependence on Deronda, and ultimately on luck, Mirah through her realization that she loves him and Mordecai through seeing him as central to his messianic vision. If Deronda is – as at first he appears to be – a Gentile, the identities of both will be threatened. Would Mirah, if Deronda had proposed marriage, have been able to reject intense personal love in favour of race and religion? Would Mordecai's vision have crumbled if Deronda had turned out not to be a Jew? Of course, these are hypothetical questions but surely what one can know is that if Mirah and Mordecai had been faced with a Deronda who remained unequivocally a Gentile, the result would have been an agonizing situation for each with unforeseeable consequences. What saves both Mirah and Mordecai from having to confront such dilemmas is luck: Deronda's good luck in turning out to have been born a Jew, which is also good luck for them. For many critics this is one of the problems of the novel, as it is argued that it takes it beyond realism into a world that is not governed by determinism and probability: '[Deronda, Mordecai and Mirah] move in a world in which the tragic conditions of life are suspended ... their world is other than our world not because they are greater than we but because their author has connived at the removal of all "obstacles and incongruities" from their path'.⁷

Of course, luck, good or bad, is destabilizing for realist fiction as any attempt to incorporate it in a realist narrative is open to the objection that the author is departing from the probable (luck by definition disrupts probability) and therefore manipulating events to serve certain authorial ends. Critics have

generally accepted Aristotle's view in his *Poetics* that a plot based on 'necessity' is superior to one based on chance and coincidence. Consequently, novels in which luck plays a central role – 'bad' luck most obviously in the case of Thomas Hardy's novels and 'good' luck in the case of *Daniel Deronda* (though whether luck can be clearly classified as good or bad is one of the questions raised in the novel) – have been problematic for many critics. But can any realism that aspires to authenticity leave luck out of an account of human experience? Eliot, as well as Hardy, was well aware of Darwin's *Origin of Species* where the emphasis on the role of 'chance' in the evolutionary process – particularly through the operation of random mutation – implies that luck is a factor in determining which species are able to adapt and survive in a perpetually changing world. This affects both writers' conception and representation of reality, especially Eliot's, where it is particularly clear that human decisions, actions and their consequences cannot be dissociated from luck and gambling. The open ending greatly reinforces this point in suggesting that actions and decisions create effects that stretch into an unpredictable future that necessarily defers any final judgement of their rightness or efficacy. Neither the characters, the reader, nor even the author can have knowledge of the consequences of actions or decisions that extend into a future beyond the time of the writing of the novel.

In the fullest critical discussion of gambling in *Daniel Deronda* it is claimed that Deronda's gambling in contrast to Gwendolen's has no problematic consequences and that this is further proof of the novel's split nature and incoherent structure: 'When Gwendolen gambles, it is an evil; when Deronda gambles ... he is blessed. Eliot repudiates one kind of gambling, while honoring the other. It tears the book apart.'⁸ In my view this reading is unpersuasive. For the major characters in the novel, including Deronda, luck and gambling are not only almost unavoidable but also ethically problematic. The fact that lucky winners are intrinsically connected with unlucky losers creates an ethical dilemma, especially as there is no necessary relation between luck and desert.

Luck is thematized in the novel from the start when in the first chapter Gwendolen fantasizes that she will be worshipped as 'a goddess of luck' (*DD*, 6) when winning at the roulette table until her luck turns as a result, so she thinks, of Deronda's disapproving gaze. There is recurrent reference to it, as in the Heine epigraph to Chapter 62 and in Mirah's response to Hans Meyrick's claim that Grandcourt's death is 'rather uncommonly lucky' with Deronda being 'a lucky fellow in being there to take care of her'. This exchange between Meyrick and Mirah brings out the ethical ambiguity of luck since it becomes clear that luck creates losers as well as winners, some of whom will be inadvertent, and even those who appear to be winners may turn out ultimately to be losers in a future that cannot be predicted:

Why will you say he is lucky – why will you use words of that sort about life and death – when what is life to one is death to another? How do you know it would be lucky if he loved Mrs Grandcourt? It might be a great evil to him. She would

take him away from my brother – I know she would. Mr Deronda would not call that lucky – to pierce my brother's heart. (DD, 622)

Of course, the subtext to this is that she fears that she will be made one of the unlucky ones if Meyrick is right, as she has fallen in love with Deronda. It might seem that the luck is with Meyrick at this point since the liaison between Deronda and Gwendolen that he envisages would seem to help his prospects with Mirah, but Meyrick's assumptions about likely winners and losers are shattered by events that he could not have predicted, so that he ultimately turns out to be one of the novel's losers.

Deronda, however, has no option but to rely on luck if he is to be in a position to commit himself to furthering Mordecai's idealistic vision. He admits that in being drawn to Mordecai's view of him as his destined successor he can be seen as being 'in a state of complete superstition' (DD, 424). He can only hope that luck will be on his side and that Mordecai might be right about his being a Jew: 'Is my side of the relation to be disappointing or fulfilling? – well, if it is ever possible for me to fulfil, I will not disappoint' (DD, 424). Also only luck will allow him to marry Mirah given that at first she indicates she could not marry anyone not of her race and faith, and at this point his being born a Jew seems to him extremely improbable. A character in Eliot's previous fiction who is structurally related to Deronda in that he can only extricate himself from what appears to be a hopeless predicament by great good luck is Godfrey Cass in *Silas Marner*, since he will be deprived both of his inheritance and of the woman he loves by his having been tricked by his brother into marrying inappropriately and fathering a daughter. But good luck for him, though it is bad luck for his wife, apparently intervenes as his wife dies and his child is adopted by Marner without his connection with them being revealed. The only person who knows about it, his brother, disappears, which makes him able to inherit his father's property and marry the woman he loves.

It might be objected that in allowing Deronda to achieve success and happiness through luck, Eliot offends against her own ethical critique of gambling and the reliance on luck in her earlier fiction. This is the case in *Silas Marner* where Godfrey's luck eventually turns, when he and Nancy are childless and Eppie chooses to remain with Silas. This leads to disappointment, bitterness and frustration, which are expected outcomes for the gambler, especially in literature. With Deronda, those critics who see him as an ideal figure and who see the text as 'split' could claim that relying on luck is not subjected to critique as in *Silas Marner* but is used merely as a plot device to enable Deronda to discover a vocation with which he can identify and to marry the woman he loves without any problematic consequences. But for Eliot good luck is always problematic from an ethical point of view as it inevitably produces disequilibrium in the relationship between self and other, and this is as true for Deronda as for Godfrey Cass and other Eliot egotists; yet so

powerful has been the perception among critics that Deronda is intended to represent moral perfection or at least transcends egotism that there has been little discussion of it.

Although conventional gamblers are interested only in winning and have little concern for those who lose, Deronda is different in that he is mentally prepared for losing if luck goes against him as he has no expectation that the world will take any account of his desires and hopes. Even though he must rely on luck he does not at this point associate it with gambling. If he is unlucky he believes the only loser will be himself. The novel suggests, however, that any reliance on luck will necessarily bring gambling into play and affect other people inadvertently so that they become sucked into the categorial opposition of winning or losing. His hope that Mordecai may be right about him and his love for Mirah draw him into a close relationship with them.

Though he has no intention of encouraging Mordecai's prophetic certainties, his behaviour towards him nevertheless greatly amplifies Mordecai's faith that he is the person he has been waiting for. Any resistance on Deronda's part to that faith lacks vigour and does not carry great conviction since they continually meet and Deronda even begins to learn Hebrew. Yet at this time he believes that the most likely explanation of his origins is that he is the illegitimate son of Sir Hugo, and until he encountered Mirah, which he sees as a fortunate chance – 'It was my good chance to find you' (*DD*, 312) – he never thought he had any connection with Jews. He has to admit that the effect on Mordecai would be shattering if it turns out he is not a Jew: 'I shall almost inevitably have to be an active cause of that poor fellow's disappointment' (*DD*, 439). Being of Jewish origin is, of course, essential as for Mordecai only someone born a Jew could fulfil his vision, and Deronda believes Mirah's devotion to her religion would prevent her marrying outside of her race and faith. If he is unlucky and not a Jew he would not be the only loser as others have become caught up in his hopes. In not distancing himself from Mirah and Mordecai because of the uncertainty of his origins or strongly emphasizing the unlikelihood of his being a Jew, he is necessarily gambling with their hopes and turning them into inadvertent gamblers. That luck ultimately favours him does not alter the fact that he takes a moral risk in placing Mordecai in particular in a potentially dangerous mental situation since his whole life revolves around the visionary expectation of discovering a second self to carry on his work. Mirah would also have been a loser since an unanticipated consequence of his rescuing her and remaining in close touch with her is that she has fallen in love with him and he with her, though neither of them knows what the other feels. However, when it transpires that luck is with him and he finds out for certain his parents were Jewish, all three become winners and, as with Godfrey Cass's luck at first, there appear to be no obvious losers.

Not only is it great good luck for Deronda that his mother – having not long to live – decides to contact him and inform him of his origins but his

luck culminates in his learning that his grandfather had a vision with affinities to that of Mordecai. This puts him now in a position to commit himself fully to Mordecai's vision and thus to find a vocation in life with which he can identify and also to declare his love for Mirah and hope to marry her. But this accumulation of good luck is slightly spoiled by a troubled intuition that, as in gambling, good luck for some inevitably means bad luck for others. Lucky winners and unlucky losers are intrinsically connected. The fact that desert is not essentially involved in determining who belongs in which category means there can be guilt on the part of the winners and resentment on the part of the losers, and such incipient guilt enters into his consciousness and increases throughout the rest of the novel.

II

What makes luck one of the unifying connections between the English and Jewish parts of the novel, at both a narrative and thematic level, is that Deronda's good luck is bad luck for Gwendolen. She is the novel's major loser, having repeatedly gambled and repeatedly lost. Chapters 55 to 57 are key chapters and in my view the encounter between Gwendolen and Deronda in these chapters is one of the most powerful episodes in the novel in artistic terms since there is dramatic equality between him and Gwendolen, it being evident here that Deronda cannot be credibly perceived as the idealized figure critics have generally seen him as being. In their scene together the collision between the lucky and the unlucky is at its most forceful in dramatic terms, and at the same time it brings into play one of the most radical ideas in the novel: luck's destabilization of morality as conceived both by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and by Kantian moral philosophy. The critical focus in previous discussions of this part of the novel, however, has tended to be almost solely on Gwendolen's situation, with the assumption that Deronda plays a purely altruistic role in the scene,⁹ and this has generally led to a failure to appreciate the literary power of this crucial encounter. It therefore merits analysis in some detail.

After an initial meeting with Gwendolen and Grandcourt on the staircase of the hotel in Genoa on his way to a second meeting with his mother, Deronda returns with 'the world changed for him' (*DD*, 585). He is, however, beginning to realize the symbiotic relationship between winning and losing. Though eager to leave Genoa, he has to defer departure when he learns that Grandcourt has drowned: 'his mind went out to Gwendolen, with anxious remembrance of what had been' (*DD*, 586). His good luck is, of course, bad luck for her, making her again a loser: his mental world has radically changed and become separated from hers. Committing himself to Mordecai's ideal makes it inevitable he will have to leave her, and without his influence and support, even

before the drowning, he had feared for her mental and spiritual well-being. The word 'mournful' recurs in these chapters in relation to his consciousness, indicating his awareness that he is in a situation in which nothing can be done as is the case when someone dies and all one can do is mourn: 'Something of a mournful impatience perhaps added itself to the solicitude about Gwendolen' (*DD*, 586); 'a mournful suspense ... made him reluctant to speak' (*DD*, 590); 'that full glance in its intense mournfulness' (*DD*, 595). He accepts that he has a responsibility towards her, especially in her present state of mind after the death of Grandcourt, but he also knows that the change in his life now that he is certain of his Jewish origins has created a difference between them that will lead him on a path that has no place for her. His sense of responsibility towards her is thus a joyless and guilty one since, as I shall argue, it coexists with a desire to be free of her. However, how can he abandon a woman who has just seen her husband die and is in a hysterical condition? A major fear on his part is that her claim on and need for him will be so great as to threaten to take him over completely. His inner conflict is magnified as escape becomes more urgent but also more difficult. Is this luckless woman going to make it impossible for him to exploit his luck, at least not without a lacerating sense of guilt on his part?

Deronda's response to Gwendolen following the drowning of Grandcourt is hardly what we expect of the idealized character he is so widely perceived as being. The reader has had the advantage of seeing the build-up of hate on the part of Gwendolen for Grandcourt in their various scenes together. In that context her graphic account to Deronda of what happened on the boat, how she could have saved Grandcourt by throwing him a rope but could not bring herself to do so because of a pre-existing desire to kill him in her thoughts, is all too believable on the part of the reader. Though she sees her refusal to act as tantamount to murder, Deronda has his own reasons for refusing to accept it. His reaction is no more adequate to the occasion than is Mordecai's response to Mirah's reading of the story of the Gentile king and the Jewish maiden. He has little desire to hear any confession on her part that will draw him into her mental world and away from Mordecai's and Mirah's and his own hopes. He finds himself confronted with an ethical responsibility towards the other, especially as his good luck is directly connected with even more bad luck from her point of view, but he is conscious that this ethical responsibility is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the fact that the change in his life will effectively end any relationship between them. Pauline Nestor has argued that the 'drama of otherness' as represented in Eliot's earlier fiction is changed radically in *Daniel Deronda* since, she claims, the 'fundamental difference between self and other is collapsed through Deronda's discovery of his Jewishness'.¹⁰ This scene on the contrary suggests that it is a major preoccupation of this novel. Deronda's joy at being able to identify with the self's desires and hopes created by his luck in turning out to be the Jew that Mordecai conceived him to be is

in danger of being sucked away by the demands of the unlucky other. When she suggests she could be a murderess he responds, “Great God!” ... in a deep, shaken voice, “don’t torture me needlessly. You have not murdered him” (DD, 591). This response shows the self resisting the claim of the other, as all the energies of the self ought ethically to engage with the needs of the other if what Gwendolen says is true. Deronda is divided between a reluctance to be drawn into the mental world of the other that may engulf him and an opposing ethical pressure to enter into human empathy with her at the level of feeling. He commits himself to her in a form of words – ‘I will not forsake you’ – but suffers guilt because he knows that his commitment is half-hearted: ‘And all the while he felt as if he were putting his name to a blank paper which might be filled up terribly’ (DD, 592). Throughout their scene together he refuses to accept Gwendolen’s judgement of herself as in effect a murderess, but in doing so is he not acting in his own interests as much as hers?

He has no wish to contemplate even the possibility that Gwendolen is a murderess, if only in a passive sense, any more than Mordecai wants to confront Mirah’s reading of the motives of the Jewish maiden. His assurances – ‘It could never be my impulse to forsake you’ – lack conviction and are more formal than truly felt: ‘His strong feeling for this stricken creature could not hinder rushing images of future difficulty’ (DD, 600). Like Mordecai, Deronda now has a higher aim in life that is self-defining for him. The needs of the other which are at odds with that aim must now take second place. This scene shows that ‘the selfless sympathy’¹¹ of Deronda is a limited perception of the character. When it comes to conflict between his mental world and that of the other, his proves to be stronger, which creates a moral problem. It is in this scene that the theme of luck with its creation of winners and losers is explicitly associated with guilt when Gwendolen tells him that in marrying Grandcourt and breaking her promise to Mrs Glasher ‘I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another’s loss – you remember? – it was like roulette – and the money burnt into me. And I could not complain. It was as if I had prayed that another should lose and I should win. And I had won. I knew it all – I knew I was guilty’ (DD, 593). This has application to Deronda as well as to Gwendolen, though of course she does not realize it. Through good luck his gamble that Mordecai is right about his being a Jew has been successful, but if he exploits his luck and chooses to abandon this unlucky woman who needs him she may suffer a mental breakdown or even attempt suicide. Confronted with this dilemma, the power to engage with the suffering of the other momentarily returns to him: ‘he was in one of those moments when the very anguish of passionate pity makes us ready to choose that we will know pleasure no more, and live only for the stricken and afflicted’ (DD, 595), echoing Dorothea’s tortured decision in *Middlemarch* to commit herself to continuing Casaubon’s work in which she no longer believes after his death. He finally restrains the interests of self,

takes her hand, a sign of reaching out to the other, and allows her to tell him her story.

Deronda has already had to listen to his mother's story, without much sympathy on his part because their mental worlds are so fundamentally different. But listening to Gwendolen enables him to connect with his Byronic mother as other – her life having been subject to bad luck after her operatic triumphs – since hearing Gwendolen's anguished account 'pierced him the deeper because it came closer upon another sad revelation of spiritual conflict' (*DD*, 594–5). Though the claim of his own mental world remains the stronger in both cases, there is an awareness on his part that the other's difference needs to be recognized and not merely assimilated to the demands of the self. Such an awareness, even if she would refuse to admit it, can also be seen as what motivated Deronda's mother to contact him and disclose his past. By choosing a new identity for him, one which cuts him off from knowledge of his origins, she had attempted to make him in her own image and deny him difference. But respecting difference means that the other must be allowed independent choice, which she eventually, if unwillingly and inadvertently, allows her son. Ironically, she had repeated the behaviour of the father against whom she had rebelled, by attempting to shape a child's life in conformity with her mental image. As she resisted her father's will – posthumously – Deronda resists her will. When given a choice, he makes one that is quite opposed to her own. This is a salutary lesson for her, but her behaviour has only taken denial of the other's difference to an extreme since the novel suggests that all human beings – even Deronda – have a natural tendency to respond to the other in terms of the interests of the self, as one sees in this scene between him and Gwendolen.

To free himself from her in order to pursue the new life that has opened up for him, he looks for a way of constructing her otherness in such a way that it is not a barrier to the self's desires and hopes through demanding his total commitment to her needs. It would therefore be easier to leave her if he can convince her that she did not murder Grandcourt and that nothing she could have done would have saved him. He attributes Grandcourt's drowning to cramp so that her throwing him a rope would not have helped, a less persuasive theory than that of the fishermen who believed he drowned because he could not swim. Even assurances of his support for her create anxiety that she will read too much into them and as a result hinder his own plans for the future. His absolving Gwendolen of any responsibility for Grandcourt's death is thus not wholly disinterested, but at least partly, if unconsciously, a strategy on his part as it will allow him to extricate himself from her before her friends arrive. She is left alone in a state of 'hysterical crying', a 'banished soul', and the last paragraph of the chapter has an ironic edge: 'She was found in this way, crushed on the floor. Such grief seemed natural in a poor lady whose husband had been drowned in her presence' (*DD*, 601). It is Deronda's abandoning her as much as the death of her husband that has reduced her to this state.

Deronda's foreboding and sense that there will be a price to pay for choosing the priorities of the mental world of the self over the needs of the other is borne out in later encounters between them:

He was the only creature who knew the real nature of Gwendolen's trouble: to withdraw himself from any appeal of hers would be to consign her to a dangerous loneliness. He could not reconcile himself to the cruelty of apparently rejecting her dependence on him; and yet in the nearer or farther distance he saw a coming wretch, which all present strengthening of their bond would make the harder. (DD, 660)

Even though he recognizes the 'cruelty' of acting in this way, 'He was obliged to risk that' (DD, 660). In other words he has to trust to luck that she will come to no harm. The ethical dilemma comes to a head in the last meeting between them in which he has to tell her of his plans to marry Mirah and leave England. This time he is the one to suffer and be convulsed by guilt: 'Deronda's anguish was intolerable. He could not help himself. He seized her outstretched hands and held them together and kneeled at her feet. She was the victim of his happiness. "I am cruel too, I am cruel," he repeated, with a sort of groan, looking up at her imploringly' (DD, 690). This scene is a reversal of their first encounter when Deronda's disapproving gaze created a sense of shame on Gwendolen's part which interrupted and shattered her run of luck. When he had discussed gambling later with her he had condemned it in abstract terms – 'I think it would be better for men not to gamble' (DD, 284) – though significantly accepting that luck inevitably plays a role in life: 'There are enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another's loss: – that is one of the ugly aspects of life' (DD, 284). At that point he did not realize that he himself would have to confront this. In this penultimate chapter, with their roles reversed, he knows in concrete terms that his gain is another's loss. In accepting that gain and making Gwendolen a loser, is his choice ethically justifiable?

III

Deronda's dilemma may be seen as a very Jewish one. His strongest desire is to devote himself to Mordecai's ideal, which offers him the vocation he has long been seeking. But Jewish moral thought strongly asserts the individual's responsibility towards the other, a moral commitment that is exemplified in the 'I-Thou' philosophy of Martin Buber and culminates in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas with its claim that in philosophy the ethical must have priority over the epistemological.¹² Eliot's ethical thinking has a strong relation to this Jewish tradition. Her knowledge of Jewish thought was encyclopaedic and she particularly admired Spinoza, whose *Ethics* she had translated. The theme of

sympathy that is recurrent in her fiction clearly owes much to Spinoza's thought, as previous critics have pointed out, especially the idea that human beings can free themselves from subjection to selfish emotions through reflecting on the fact that others are also subject to such emotions, thus recognizing both human connection and difference. This is shown most powerfully in Chapter 21 of *Middlemarch* when Dorothea emerges from the 'moral stupidity' of egotism and 'conceive[s] with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling ... that [Casaubon] had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' (M, 208).

For Levinas even if the other person is 'other' in the most absolute sense, the demand presented by that other should not be compromised. Thus Levinas's ethics entails that self-interest or individual desire should submit to the demands of the other. Though Eliot would almost certainly have greatly respected such a view, the ethical perspective in *Daniel Deronda* is somewhat different since it suggests that not only can human beings never totally transcend their own mental world with its interests and priorities but also that it is open to question whether the moral ideal should always be to resist the ego's claims. She is perhaps closer to Derrida's position in his critical discussion of Levinas in his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', where he argues that self and other must have a shared humanity in order for the self to have an ethical responsibility towards the other, which implies that neither self nor other has an unquestionable ethical priority.¹³ Gwendolen as other to Deronda is also seeing things from her own mental perspective. This raises the question as to why one set of claims and interests should completely abolish another set as Levinasian ethics would seem to demand. For Eliot ethical action emerges out of a negotiation between self and other, one which may prove impossible to achieve fully to the satisfaction of both but should at least be striven for. To assert that the other's claim should always be prior is a kind of moral absolutism that she challenges in her fiction. In some cases the other's claim may prove the more powerful, but in different cases it may not. One cannot leave context, circumstances and choice out of account in making ethical decisions. This can create complex moral predicaments, none more so than in *Middlemarch* when Dorothea has to decide whether to agree to devote herself to Casaubon's work after his death despite her loss of faith in it. After mental turmoil she is prepared to submit to his wish; she sees herself as 'fettered', but 'she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers' (M, 475). After his death, however, her 'embittering discovery' that he was a man 'whose thoughts were lower than she had believed' (M, 486) makes her feel no qualms about not continuing his work, thus rejecting the claim of the other. Though in one context and set of circumstances the demands of the other may prevail over the desires and aspirations that shape the self's mental world, in another context a different choice may be made. Mordecai, for example, saw the claim of the other as more powerful than the demands

of the self when he chose to turn back from journeying to the East to look after his mother.

Deronda is required to make a decision in a situation that is particularly undecidable in a Derridean sense: 'Ethics and politics ... start with undecidability.'¹⁴ No compromise or pragmatic solution seems possible in Deronda's situation; yet a decision must be made in the knowledge that future events may call into question the rightness of the decision. As no fundamental principle can transcend choice in such a context of undecidability, it is inevitable that it will be associated with anguish and guilt. There would also be guilt if he decided that his moral responsibility towards Gwendolen necessitated delaying for an indeterminate length of time his devotion to Mordecai's proto-Zionist project, which could be shattering for a man with not long to live. The unresolved ending gives greater force to the anguish he feels when he finally has to disclose to Gwendolen the choice he has made as the consequences of decisions cannot be predicted with any security. Would Deronda's decision still be the right one if Gwendolen collapsed into a state of insanity or committed suicide after he left her or if his attempt to further Mordecai's vision proved to be a failure? What makes Deronda different from characters faced with 'undecidability' in Eliot's previous fiction, however, is that he trusts to luck and is aware that his decision involves 'risk'. Does this make it ethically dubious?

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel's treatment of luck is that significant philosophical issues are raised since Deronda's ethical dilemma anticipates modern philosophical discussion of whether luck makes a moral difference. If luck does make such a difference, then the conventional moral position which one finds in Judaeo-Christian and Kantian moral thinking that luck plays (or at least ought to play) no role in morality is questionable. If Deronda is again lucky and Gwendolen survives well enough without him and he proves worthy of Mordecai's hopes and expectations, then his decision to abandon her despite her need for him could be regarded as morally justified, but if she suffers mental breakdown or he fails to fulfil Mordecai's hopes, then his decision could be seen as morally problematic. Bernard Williams has used the idea of 'moral luck' to undermine the notion of morality and to argue, in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, for its replacement by the 'ethical': 'The ideals of morality have without doubt ... played a part in producing some actual justice in the world and in mobilizing power and social opportunity to compensate for bad luck in concrete terms. But the idea of a value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion.'¹⁵ It may be more fruitful to regard Eliot as an 'ethical' writer in Williams's sense rather than the stern moralist that generations of readers and critics have seen her as being.

The main example Williams uses to exemplify the concept of moral luck is very pertinent to Deronda's situation. Williams argues that it is possible to see Gauguin or some version of him (the real Gauguin famously deserted his wife and five children to pursue his ambition to be a great painter) as not necessarily

an amoral figure: 'this other Gauguin is someone who shares the same world of moral concerns' as those who respect morality but who chooses to 'run ... a risk within morality',¹⁶ a risk an amoral version of Gauguin would not have any conception of and so would not run. The risk is that if his ambition to be a great artist fails then the suffering he has inflicted on others as a result will have no moral justification, but if it succeeds it could be argued that his action is morally justifiable from a rational point of view. Eliot's representation of Deronda's relationship with Gwendolen and the ethical choice he is presented with anticipates Williams's Gauguin example. Deronda abandons Gwendolen though aware that she is extremely vulnerable and reliant on him in order to pursue an ideal that he knows may turn out to be unattainable. The unresolved ending of the novel defers any resolution of the question, the reader being given no knowledge of a future that is beyond the scope of the novel. This denies the reader (and author) knowledge as to whether Deronda's luck will hold into the future, with Gwendolen overcoming her demons without his help and his journey to 'the East' laying the foundations for the restoration of 'a political existence' (*DD*, 688) to the Jews. In Gwendolen's final letter to him, she can give no promises that she will be able to live up to his hopes for her: '*I do not yet see how that can be*', but her tone is guardedly optimistic. For Deronda, however, this letter is 'more precious than gold or gems' (*DD*, 694), as it gives him hope that abandoning Gwendolen may be less of a risk than he fears. He might, however, have been less reassured if he had known that after their last meeting, 'Through the day and half the night she fell continually into fits of shrieking' (*DD*, 692). But more positively, in that letter Deronda becomes the other for her when she acknowledges that she caused him to grieve on her behalf and accepts that he has chosen a life she cannot share in. The role of the other can oscillate, and perhaps for Eliot experiencing that shift and being able to reflect on it is fundamental to her Spinozan concept of the ethical.

The novel suggests that in relying on luck Deronda is not acting unethically though his actions may not be reconcilable with morality as viewed from a religious or Kantian position. Since luck permeates every aspect of life, as this novel shows, it cannot be excluded from the ethical. Judgements as to the rightness of decisions or actions cannot help but be deferred since ethical decisions may have unpredictable consequences in the future. In Victorian fiction generally, including Eliot's earlier novels, the ethical tends to demand decision and action in static situations: Jane Eyre resists the temptation to enter into a bigamous marriage with Rochester; Little Dorrit chooses to care for and protect her unworthy father; Romola overcomes her despair and disillusionment in taking action to relieve suffering in a plague-ridden village. But in *Deronda*, the ethical struggle takes place primarily and most powerfully within consciousness. The division between mental worlds is difficult to reconcile with the concept of responsibility towards the other, with the result that ethical choice may lead to anguish, as with Deronda. Luck and gambling

come into play since future events may call into question ethical decisions. This does not apply only to Deronda in the novel. Is Mordecai's apparently ethical decision to accept his unregenerate father – a man capable of virtually any action that will serve his self-interest – into his home not also a gamble? Mordecai may be seen as lucky, in that only Deronda's ring is stolen, but if Lapidoth had done something worse, such as a murder, the ethics of the original decision would at the very least be compromised, with Mordecai open to the *ex post facto* judgement of being guilty of taking an irresponsible risk. Whereas Mordecai sees the ethical in static terms that leave consequences out of the account, for Deronda, as one sees in his experience with the traumatized Gwendolen, ethical decisions bring into play risk, dependence on luck and anguished consciousness.

IV

The focus of this chapter so far has not been on the politics of the novel, particularly its concern with nationalism and proto-Zionism, and it could be argued that the political aspect is at odds with the view that luck, gambling and the unpredictability of the future shape the nature of the plot and the treatment of character and the ethical. Mordecai's prophetic vision of the achievement of Jewish nationhood and what most commentators have seen as Deronda's acceptance of and commitment to it have been widely interpreted as creating a plot in which visionary prophecy is the predominant element. Nestor, for example, refers to Deronda's 'embrace of Mordecai and his prophecy' and claims that he becomes virtually identical with Mordecai:

[T]he sense of Daniel's epic destiny depends not only on a repudiation of difference, but it also comes to rely on its concomitant, the psychological fantasy of wholeness, in which there is no lack ... So, Daniel is imaged as Mordecai's 'new self' ... and he comes to speak 'from Mordecai's mind as much as from his own' ... Their separate identities are fused.¹⁷

Such an identification of Deronda with Mordecai has been to a significant extent responsible for the view that Eliot departs from her former realism in favour of prophetic romance.

Amanda Anderson has, however, subjected the identification of Deronda with Mordecai to a persuasive critique:

Taking Mordecai's word for it, many critics have felt comfortable conflating the views of two characters who appeared destined to merge anyway. But Deronda actively resists Mordecai's vision of a complete mind-meld, precisely because it runs counter to his view of an open-ended dialogue, whether it be between individuals, between races, or between individuals and their own cultural heritage.¹⁸

She goes on to argue that '[d]espite the appearance of reconciliation', Deronda and Mordecai essentially 'occupy radically different philosophical universes'. However, her criticism of Mordecai for 'a form of organicist nationalistic doctrine, deriving from Herder and exemplified most dramatically in Adam Müller',¹⁹ is more problematic. Herder supported nationality as a concept but as a cultural relativist was no orthodox nationalist and certainly different from Müller. Mordecai is close to Herder when he says, 'I cherish nothing for the Jewish nation, I seek nothing for them, but the good which promises the good of all nations' (*DD*, 458), and his ultimate aim is not only the Jews' 'better future' but 'the better future of the world' (*DD*, 459).²⁰ For Eliot, messianic prophets – even if, as Anderson puts it, they tend towards an authoritarianism that 'ultimately quells all argument and dialogue'²¹ – are of value as inspirational figures and for generating visions that can shape action. Without Mordecai's prophetic sense of certainty Deronda would not have discovered the partiality that provides him ultimately with a vocation. Deronda himself has no aspirations to be a prophet. For him, therefore, success in founding a Jewish state will require luck, and his decision to devote his life to this ideal involves two significant gambles on his part: first that Mordecai is a great visionary and not merely a fanatic, and second that the restoration of Jewish nationhood will be a practical possibility. He accepts that he could fail – 'Failure will not be ignoble' (*DD*, 642) – and his account to Gwendolen of his 'task' also displays little prophetic confidence: 'I am resolved to begin it, however feebly ... At the least, I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own' (*DD*, 688). At the time of writing her novel Eliot could not, of course, know whether Deronda's luck will continue to hold, but realism is not sacrificed in favour of prophecy. However, this theme creates difficulties for readers of the novel at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for such readers, unlike Eliot as author, know that history provided the necessary luck since the cause to which Deronda chose to devote his life eventually succeeded. But as I have suggested above, good luck for some inevitably means bad luck for others, and Edward Said claimed that the success of the Zionist cause has been bad luck for Palestinians.

Mordecai's idealism, his prophetic vision of what will result from the foundation of a Jewish nation, 'a new Judaea, poised between East and West – a covenant of reconciliation' (*DD*, 459), seems a long way from being fulfilled and who knows if it ever will be. However, I would suggest that for Eliot idealistic prophecy should not be judged on the basis of accurate prediction of the future; its value lies in its messianic form. Deronda, like the later Derrida, his near namesake, shows no belief in messianism for its religious or metaphysical content, but as a structure without content – messianicity as Derrida calls it – it creates a hopeful openness towards a future to come that cannot be determined as it is subject to chance, accident, the unexpected.²² It therefore cannot be dissociated from luck. In writing a novel that had a

political message and a prophetic dimension, even if its realization seemed to belong in the realm of the messianic, Eliot no doubt hoped – in effect trusted to luck – that this would further the greater good of the world, but of course there was always the possibility that it would fail or that even if it succeeded it would be seen as doing more harm than good. Responses to the novel at the time of its publication tended to view the ideal of Jewish nationhood as an utterly unrealistic aspiration, and its political aspect was therefore not taken very seriously, except among certain Jewish readers, and many readers now, influenced by Said and post-colonial criticism, view it negatively because they see it as having promoted colonialism and imperialism. How it will be viewed in the future is unpredictable. That will partly depend on future events and whether Mordecai proves to be a lucky or an unlucky visionary in regard to his messianic hope in reconciliation. In being open towards the future and having played a performative role in shaping it, a shaping that continues to be controversial and still politically unresolved, *Daniel Deronda* is likely to remain outside of critical consensus for the foreseeable future, with literary judgement and assessment continuing to be provisional.