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Eliot and the Byronic

I

Although almost all critics of George Eliot have recognized her concern with egotism, she is not generally considered among those nineteenth-century writers who had a serious interest in the Byronic egotist, the character who had emerged from Gothic literature and the *Sturm und Drang* and who came to the greatest prominence in the works of Byron. This figure played an important part in nineteenth-century literature and was used by numerous writers to signify revolt or egotistic aspiration. Perhaps the fundamental attribute of the Byronic egotist is that he refuses to accept any external source of authority which can define him. He either defies all sources of authority which try to assert their superiority over the self, like Byron's Manfred, or else he thinks he can create his own values by an act of will quite independently of all generally accepted moral sanctions.¹ However, characters with Byronic aspects or associations who are devoted to ego or will or to their own self-chosen values appear in most of her novels, such as Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss* to a minor degree; Mrs Transome and Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt*; Ladislav in *Middlemarch*, called a 'sort of Byronic hero' (M, 375) by Mrs Cadwallader though more of a Romantic aesthete, and Lydgate in whom there are traces of the Byronic; and in *Daniel Deronda*, where the Byronic is more prominent than in her other fiction, there is Gwendolen Harleth, inspired by Byron's grand-niece whom Eliot saw gambling in Bad Homburg, Deronda's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, committed to her own set of individualistic values, and Grandcourt, in whom the passion of youth has degenerated into sadism in middle age and who may represent for Eliot Byronism in decay. Critics do not generally discuss these characters in Byronic terms, understandably since realist fiction is not well adapted to representing the Byronic in its most extreme form. Eliot's most obviously Byronic figures are to be found in her poetry, particularly Armgart in the poem of the same name and Don Silva in her tragic drama in verse, *The Spanish Gypsy*.

Eliot's recurrent interest in the Byronic, taking her work as a whole, deserves the attention of critics. Although she grew to dislike Byron both as a man and as a poet – 'Byron and his poetry have become more and more repugnant to me of late years' (*Letters*, V, 54) – her knowledge of his work is apparent throughout her writing. Exploring why her work focuses on the Byronic as late as the 1860s and 1870s and why she took the trouble to subject it to critique, most powerfully in

The Spanish Gypsy, will again reveal her concern with the major intellectual and philosophical issues of her time. Like Darwinism, the Byronic can be seen as a significant threat which, again like Darwinism, has not gone away and raises issues which remain pertinent even in the twenty-first century.

It is in *The Spanish Gypsy* that Eliot most seriously engages with the Byronic. It is certainly one of her most ambitious works in its conception – she worked on it for four years until its publication in 1868 – even if the critical consensus is that it is a failure in artistic terms. Byron was the most subversive of the Romantics and created a tradition of transgression that continued through the nineteenth century and beyond. In the Romantic period, the Byronic egotist can be seen as symbolizing a negative rebellion against a universe which was, as Carlyle put it in his semi-autobiographical *Sartor Resartus*, ‘all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb’.² Responding in Byronic fashion, Carlyle’s persona Teufelsdröckh, had asserted the ‘Everlasting No’, a negativity that at least enabled resistance even if it had no positive solution. He was subsequently able to transcend such egotistic defiance primarily, like both Wordsworth and Goethe, by discovering the presence of God in an organic universe and proclaimed famously, ‘Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe’. But in the later nineteenth century, with developments in philosophy and science, culminating in Darwin, the concept of a mechanical, amoral, godless universe was more powerfully present than it had ever been. Was the Byronic egotist’s pessimism about the universe and stance of defiance and revolt not still a valid one? Also, in the course of the nineteenth century, there were expressions of egotism and pessimism – the latter notably by Schopenhauer, an admirer of Byron’s poetry – which went much further than Byron. Eliot’s concern with this was perhaps heightened by the fact that the work of Feuerbach, whose major work, *The Essence of Christianity*, she had translated – ‘With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree, but of course I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably’ (*Letters*, II, 153) – had been used to justify the most extreme egotistic views: ‘intelligent opponents have often urged it against Feuerbach that his system must morally lead to pure Egoism.’³ The most uncompromising expression of egotism in the nineteenth century, Max Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (The Ego and His Own) first published in 1844, was strongly influenced by Feuerbach’s philosophy, both Feuerbach and Stirner being associated with the ‘Young Hegelians’. Eliot would surely have been worried at such a development of ideas she accepted and which led Stirner to assert that all values stemmed from the self: ‘I decide whether it is the *right thing* in me; there is no right *outside* me. If it is right for *me*, it is right.’⁴ Similar views can be found in Nietzsche, an admirer of Byron’s *Manfred*: ‘The distinguished type of human being feels *himself* as value-determining; ... he knows that *he* is the something which gives honor to objects; he *creates values*.’⁵ Byron can therefore be seen as perhaps the most

significant source of a sceptical, nihilistic, ego-centred tradition of thought that developed through the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century and beyond.

Eliot, who had rejected belief in a transcendent reality, cannot refute the Byronic egotist's claim that in an amoral universe the individual is free to rebel or assert his own chosen values by proclaiming like Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* that nature is the 'Living Garment of God'. Although she recognized the value of religion when she praised church assemblies because their very nature expressed 'the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law which is to lift us into willing obedience and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse' (*Letters*, V, 448), she herself could not argue that the truth of religion supported Christian morality and refuted the egotist's claim that there is no moral order which can define the self. Her writing suggests – to represent her position in the most basic terms – that the self has an existential need for a sense of moral order, but it must first of all be discovered within the self as feeling. This could then lead to a larger social and moral vision. Even if the universe was amoral and godless, it was simplistic to believe that the egotist could simply dismiss all moral and religious sanctions and adhere to his or her own chosen value. If Byron's writing is understood in the intellectual and cultural context I have sketched above, then Eliot's interest in Byronic egotism is easily comprehended. But as with Darwinism Eliot cannot merely reject the Byronic by denying its validity. Her aim therefore is not merely to attack or condemn the Byronic Don Silva but to explore the roots of his elevation of the ego and suggest that almost inevitably it will have a tragic outcome. In the notes on tragedy she left regarding the poem she wrote,

A tragedy has not to expound why the individual must give way to the general: it has to show that it is compelled to give way, the tragedy consisting in the struggle involved, and often in the entirely calamitous issue in spite of a grand submission. Silva represents the tragedy of entire rebellion: Fedalma of a grand submission, which is rendered vain by the effects of Silva's rebellion: Zarca, the struggle for a great end, rendered vain by the surrounding conditions of life.⁶

The Spanish Gypsy may have aroused the interest of few Eliot commentators, but if treated as a poem of ideas it has considerable force and illuminates both Eliot's thinking and why the Byronic plays a significant role in her fiction. It shows that her interests extended to areas not commonly associated with her, interests which connect her with a European literary and intellectual context since the Byronic is much more significant in German, French and Russian literature than in English literature after Byron. It is clear that *The Spanish Gypsy* falls into the trap that Eliot herself recognized, that of 'laps[ing] from the picture to the diagram' (*Letters*, IV, 300), an artistic weakness she endeavoured to overcome in her novels, as I shall discuss in later chapters, but the fact that she devoted so much time to its composition shows how important it was to her to try

to counter the subversive power that the Byronic continued to exert within European culture.

II

Don Silva is a Spanish knight who is disillusioned with his Spanish heritage, primarily because of the nature of the war against the Moors and the activities of the Inquisition. Being contemptuous of Spanish policies, he feels that his heritage has no claim on his respect and that he is justified in rebelling against it. Yet he has no alternative plan of action in mind. He still serves the Spanish cause, though he regards himself as being free to do as he likes. His rebellion only manifests itself as negative defiance. He is opposed and reproached by his uncle, the prior, the personification of the Spanish imperialist and an eager inquisitor. Silva's resolve to marry the non-Spanish Fedalma, who has Gypsy origins, is seen by the prior as an implicit rejection of his duty to Spain. Silva replies with Byronic defiance:

'Tis you, not I, will gibbet our great name
To rot in infamy. If I am strong
In patience now, trust me, I can be strong
Then in defiance.⁷

But the prior makes the prophetic statement that if he utterly rejects the claims of the past for his own self-chosen value he will never find a stable identity:

you will walk
For ever with a tortured double self,
A self that will be hungry while you feast,
Will blush with shame while you are glorified,
Will feel the ache and chill of desolation,
Even in the very bosom of your love. (SG, 84)

Brought up in a tradition he can no longer accept, unable to feel any allegiance to a Christianity perverted into persecution, Silva has created his own personal value out of love. Fedalma is his substitute for the values he has lost: in her 'Silva found a heaven / Where faith and hope were drowned as stars in day' (SG, 178). Even if this blasphemy will damn him, he will choose her and reject his former God:

Is there no God for me
Save him whose cross I have forsaken? – Well,
I am for ever exiled – but with her! (SG, 315)

In the extremes to which Silva takes it, love is an attempt at a purely subjective creation of value to overcome his despair, having come to believe that the world is meaningless and valueless. The following speech anticipates Schopenhauer at his most extreme:

Death is the king of this world; 'tis his park
Where he breeds life to feed him. Cries of pain
Are music for his banquet; and the masque –
The last grand masque for his diversion, is
The Holy Inquisition. (SG, 193)

Love is a desperate effort to choose consciously his own value in order that the self can transcend the amorality of life and protect himself against despair. He cannot therefore give up Fedalma when she decides to honour her Gypsy heritage at the behest of her father. Silva thinks that his chosen value of love is superior to the claims of his past and all his former allegiances. It justifies the breaking of all bonds or duties, and he is prepared to commit any action, no matter how immoral in traditional terms, to retain it: 'I will sin, / If sin I must, to win my life again' (SG, 197). To lose her is to lose his own self: 'that lost self my life is aching with' (SG, 198) and declares that his love for her, 'Makes highest law, must be the voice of God' (SG, 212).

He dismisses any authority superior to the self in Stirner-like or proto-Nietzschean fashion:

I will elect my deeds, and be the liege
Not of my birth, but of that good alone
I have discerned and chosen. (SG, 391)

This extreme expression of Byronic egotism claims that there is nothing external to the self that can define it, and all past claims or present obstacles must be crushed by the will. Since the mind can recognize no values beyond the self as valid, it must create its own value. Eliot tests this philosophy against experience in the poem.

But though Silva has rebelled against his Spanish past, he has not liberated himself from it. His identity is still basically defined by the fact that he is a Spanish knight. The way of life and the attitudes of the latter are an inherent part of him, which he does not even think of rejecting. It is an important part of Eliot's treatment of the Byronic elevation of the ego to show that social factors are among its most important determinants. Eliot, with her knowledge of sociology and psychology, places the egotist in a social situation. His attitudes and behaviour cannot be considered in isolation, for they are the product of a particular society and culture that has shaped him. He unquestioningly identifies with the assumptions of one who has been brought up as a Spanish

aristocrat. When he learns of Fedalma's flight and Gypsy birth, he regards these as 'momentary crosses, hindrances / A Spanish noble might despise' (SG, 175). He is quite confident he can regain her:

What could a Spanish noble not command?
He only helped the Queen, because he chose;
Could war on Spaniards, and could spare the Moor;
Buy justice, or defeat it – if he would:
Was loyal, not from weakness but from strength
Of high resolve to use his birthright well. (SG, 175)

The will which he celebrates is thus the product of the aristocratic background he professes to despise. His assertion of personal will to defy the demands of the tradition in which he has been brought up is only a negative expression of the social domination inherent in that tradition:

Don Silva had been suckled in that creed
(A high-taught speculative noble else),
Held it absurd as foolish argument
If any failed in deference, was too proud
Not to be courteous to so poor a knave
As one who knew not necessary truths
Of birth and dues of rank; but cross his will,
The miracle-working will, his rage leapt out
As by a right divine to rage more fatal
Than a mere mortal man's. (SG, 176)

His claim, then, that one can create one's own value by the power of the will is inherently flawed. Instead of discovering a new basis for his identity, he is merely exploiting Spanish aristocratic values in his personal interests. The following assertion of his will philosophy and of Byronic egotism is thus undermined by its implicit assumptions:

I have no help
Save reptile secrecy, and no revenge
Save that I *will* do what he [the prior] schemes to hinder.
Ay, secrecy, and disobedience – these
No tyranny can master. Disobey!
You may divide the universe with God,
Keeping your will unbent, and hold a world
Where He is not supreme. (SG, 177)

The poem calls into question this philosophy by showing that it is not a freely chosen position, the only possible response to a world without acceptable

values. In Silva's case, it is rather the product of his alienation from his social background and the negative assertion of the social attitudes in which he has been brought up. He is another variation on the comment in *Felix Holt* that 'there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life'. The narrator also acknowledges that underlying his outward will assertion and defiance, he felt 'Murmurs of doubt, the weakness of a self / That is not one' (SG, 178), though this insecurity only makes him rebel the more against the prior, whose identity is totally defined by his Catholic faith:

With all his outflung rage
Silva half shrank before the steadfast man
Whose life was one compacted whole, a realm
Where the rule changed not, and the law was strong.
Then that reluctant homage stirred new hate,
And gave rebellion an intenser will. (SG, 178)

Even his rebellion, then, is not freely chosen but is the outcome of the psychological strain which results from his social alienation.

One of the most important debates in the poem, in which Silva's Byronic egotism is challenged, is that between Silva and his Jewish servant Sephardo. To Silva's assertion that 'Death is the king of this world', Sephardo replies that even if this were so, human morality would still remain. A physician would know that mercy existed within himself even if all the angels in heaven denied it. If God does not exist and the world is as Silva describes it, which Sephardo makes no attempt to deny, the good would still exist as a purely human construct based on human feeling. The individual is inextricably a part of humanity and can never achieve complete cultural transcendence. The ego itself is in a large degree a cultural product. It was an illusion, then, to believe that the egotist could completely separate himself from his fellow human beings and be totally self-sufficient.

Silva goes on to proclaim the need for 'naked manhood' (SG, 195), for men who are unattached to any beliefs or systems and can stand alone. Sephardo replies that there is no such thing. We all owe allegiance to something larger than ourselves, in his case to his Jewish heritage. It is monstrous to consider all things without preferences; we are compelled to have certain priorities and partialities: 'My father is first father and then man.' But Silva is prepared to cast aside all claims in choosing to marry Fedalma:

That I'm a Christian knight and Spanish duke!
The consequence? Why, that I know. It lies
In my own hands and not on raven tongues. (SG, 201)

But the fragility of his view that these characteristics are mere accidental features has already been made apparent. Sephardo, in contrast, refers 'to the

brand / Of brotherhood that limits every pledge' (SG, 202). We need some law that is superior to the will in order to define the self:

Our law must be without us or within.
The Highest speaks through all our people's voice,
Custom, tradition, and old sanctities;
Or he reveals himself by new decrees
Of inward certitude. (SG, 211)

The implication of Sephardo's argument – one which draws on both Feuerbachian and Carlylean thinking – is that the self's inner need for a sense of meaning and value is projected outwardly in customs and traditions, but if these become outdated and moribund, their essential content, which corresponds to this need within the self, must be reformulated. Silva makes no attempt to do this. The Spanish society he is a part of has become decadent since it strives to maintain itself through domination and persecution of other races and religious groups. Instead of trying to find a new form for the valuable content of his heritage or acting against corrupt forces within it, he constructs a self-created philosophy of the will. Eliot tests this philosophy against experience and shows that it offers no possibility of a stable identity. One cannot choose to reject the past completely without fragmenting the self.

Silva soon discovers this. The town of Bedmár is taken by the Gypsies, and many of his former friends are killed and the prior is executed. This crushingly brings home to him how deep-rooted is his connection with the heritage he thinks he can reject: his own acts against his former stronghold are felt as self-inflicted wounds. In this crisis, he realizes that his Spanish past is a fundamental part of his being, and his inner life becomes 'cancerous':

Silva had but rebelled – he was not free;
And all the subtle cords that bound his soul
Were tightened by the strain of one rash leap
Made in defiance. (SG, 340)

He is unable to escape from 'his past-created, unchanged self'. The self cannot remain authentically human if it denies continuity of being, and any rejection of the defining elements in his past by an act of will must inflict terrible psychological wounds. He even acknowledges that the prior embodies certain values which are an integral part of his selfhood. He repudiates the role he has chosen: 'I am a Catholic knight, / A Spaniard who will die a Spaniard's death!' (SG, 345) and kills Zarca, the Gypsy leader and Fedalma's father.

The consequence of rejecting his past is an intolerable sense of self-division. This leads to a severe identity crisis which makes him commit murder. The valuable content of his past life must be the basis for any secure sense of

selfhood. Even in a Spain ruled by the Inquisition this is so; he cannot simply reject Christianity and the Spanish tradition and worship a self-created God of his own. At the end of the poem he commits himself to serving

that Spain
Who nourished me on her expectant breast,
The heir of highest gifts. (SG, 371)

III

Neither Silva nor Fedalma can wholeheartedly accept the tradition they belong to. Fedalma, though she adopts the opposite position to Silva, and chooses to obey her father and accept her Gypsy origin, derives no happiness from this choice. The poem suggests that their dissociation from their respective traditions represents the alienated response of the modern consciousness to the claims of the past. In contrast, both the prior and Zarca, in different ways, possess utterly stable identities. The prior believes totally in the objective truth and superiority of his religion, and Zarca has identified himself with the ideal of Gypsy nationhood. Silva is naturally alienated from a Spain dominated by the Inquisition, and Fedalma has been brought up outside the Gypsy tradition and can thus only make a willed decision to accept it. She cannot respond to it with an undivided consciousness. The prior and Zarca, being certain of their commitments, are free from the sense of self-division created by excess of self-consciousness. Even the prospect of death cannot undermine the prior's cast-iron sense of his identity. He possessed 'The strength of resolute undivided souls / Who, owning law, obey it' (SG, 340). For Fedalma and Silva, such certainty is impossible: their situations have necessarily made them self-conscious and self-divided. Silva is 'Doom-gifted with long resonant consciousness / And perilous heightening of the sentient soul' (SG, 74), and after his desertion suffers from the 'tortured double self' the prior had prophesied.

Fedalma's self-division is also evident, though she does not suffer the same identity crisis as Silva. Her acceptance of her Gypsy role which entails rejection of passionate love means she must choose sorrow, the 'sublimar pain', for her choice, 'cut her heart with smiles beneath the knife, / Like a sweet babe foredoomed by prophecy' (SG, 292). Though she makes a conscious decision to adopt the Gypsy way of life, she feels emotionally detached from it. She contrasts her own condition with that of her Gypsy servant, Hinda:

She knows no struggles, sees no double path:
Here fate is freedom, for her will is one
With her own people's law, the only law

She ever knew. For me – I have fire within,
But on my will there falls the chilling snow
Of thoughts that come as subtly as soft flakes,
Yet press at last with hard and icy weight. (SG, 278)

Fedalma's situation, and the poem suggests it is symbolic of the modern or post-Romantic situation, has deprived her of the stability and certainty of her servant. She is cut off from such a sense of tribal consciousness. She is an example of the isolated, self-conscious ego, detached from those traditional beliefs, those 'cosmic syntaxes',⁸ which could integrate the self within a single world view that was accepted as true.

Fedalma's adoption of Gypsy life only makes her more aware of her divided consciousness. When she feels the power of Zarca's vision, she thinks she can 'walk erect, hiding my life-long wound'. At such times she feels strong in her resolve. But this feeling is only temporary: self-consciousness returns and the sense that 'There's nought but chill grey silence, or the hum / And fitful discord of a vulgar world' (SG, 279). Love for both Silva and Fedalma had been an attempt to heal the division they felt in themselves. It was a form of compensation for the lack of a heritage or a belief with which they could identify completely.

Silva's position is the more difficult since the tradition he is a part of has clearly become corrupt and decadent. Fedalma can at least assent intellectually and with part of her feelings to the Gypsy purpose. Silva's Byronic rebellion is an intellectual response to his situation:

Thus he called on Thought.
On dexterous Thought, with its swift alchemy
To change all forms, dissolve all prejudice
Of man's long heritage, and yield him up
A crude fused world to fashion as he would. (SG, 311–12)

But he discovers that there are deeper forces in the self that cannot be rejected by the will. After joining the Gypsies, he yearns for the memories and associations of the past, for human contact. The alienation and isolation involved in rejecting his roots and confronting the indifferent universe alone proves too much:

He could not grasp Night's black blank mystery
And wear it for a spiritual garb
Creed-proof: he shuddered at its passionless touch. (SG, 312)

The strain his rebellion places on his inner self is intolerable. Although among his people 'he had played / In sceptic ease with saints and litanies', he now comes to realize their symbolic value. The religious and ancestral symbols connected

with Spanish life are forms which express a meaning which is inextricably a part of himself, even supporting him while he scorned them:

Sustaining him even when he idly played
With rules, beliefs, charges, and ceremonies
As arbitrary fooling. (SG, 314)

The religious and social forms he has tried to reject are not mere outward symbols of an evil system: they express the fundamental human values of the way of life in which he has been brought up, and more than that, they symbolize the human truths created by feeling in its encounter with external reality. The essential identity of Spain still exists even if it has been corrupted by the Inquisition. He discovers by experience that the philosophy of the ego and the will is an intolerable violation of his inner self which cannot be borne. Any identity that denies that it needs to connect with past experience is at risk of succumbing to alienation or even worse to a psychological crisis in which the self seems to become infected by disease:

Forcing each pulse to feed its anguish, turning
All sweetest residues of healthy life
To fibrous clutches of slow misery. (SG, 340)

IV

The Spanish Gypsy does not simply attack Silva's egotism and devotion to the will, however, but the energies they generate need to be properly directed. This is apparent in the contrast between Silva and Zarca, in many ways as supreme an egotist as Silva. But Zarca commits all his egotistic energies to furthering what he believes are the best interests of his people through creating for them by power of will a sense of nationhood. His vision resembles that of a religious prophet. Fedalma implicitly compares him to Moses, Christ and Mahomet. He is treated in the poem like a Carlylean hero who creates history by the force of his vision. For him it is a value-creating act. He knows that there is nothing beyond it, no providence, that guarantees its success:

No good is certain, but the steadfast mind,
The undivided will to seek the good:
'Tis that compels the elements, and wrings
A human music from the indifferent air.
The greatest gift the hero leaves his race
Is to have been a hero. (SG, 162)

The good does not exist external to Man; it must be created by him as heroic visionary. In contrast to Silva, Zarca does not regard the lack of immanent

meaning and value in the world as a justification for Byronic egotism but rather as urging the creation of value through a social and moral vision that brings the good into being.

However, the poem does not cover up moral complexities and ambiguities. Zarca's vision may appear questionable because it seems to be characterized by the same dangerous idealism that underlies the prior's beliefs. Both men are prepared to go beyond recognized moral boundaries in order to achieve what they regard as the good. This is a recurrent theme in Eliot's works, most obviously in *Romola*, written before *The Spanish Gypsy*, and *Daniel Deronda* written after. The prior's belief in the absolute truth of his religion convinces him that acts of evil cease to be evil if they favour what he regards as God's purpose: 'Tis so God governs, using wicked men – / Nay, scheming fiends, to work his purposes' (SG, 131). In this way he can justify the Inquisition.

This kind of reasoning is the consequence of identifying his beliefs with an objective truth beyond the human realm. If the good is seen as something external to the human, whatever helps to achieve it is regarded as right. Good and evil are not defined in relation to humanity but in terms of a rigid doctrine which is more important than the human and has become separated from it. But Zarca differs from the prior in an important respect, since for him evil is always evil. It cannot be redeemed even if it furthers his concept of the good. No good that will be achieved will ever lift the burden of evil. It may serve as grounds to defend an act of evil, but it can never, as the prior believes, change its nature.

Since the Zíncali have no philosophy or religion which will allow them to come to terms with problems of this kind, Zarca must heroically elect to bear this burden for them. In this he again greatly resembles the Carlylean hero who identifies his deepest insight with the divine and uses his possession of it to justify his authority over his people. Cruel acts may be necessary if the Gypsies are to survive:

they shall be justified
By my high purpose, by the clear-seen good
That grew into my vision as I grew,
And makes my nature's function, the full pulse
Of inbred kingship ...

The Zíncali have no god
Who speaks to them and calls them his, unless
I, Zarca, carry living in my frame
The power divine that chooses them and saves. (SG, 324–5)

He knows that killing the Spaniards is evil, but he believes there is no alternative. Yet his essential humanity is shown in his sympathy with the dead of Bedmár. This act was initiated before Silva joined the Gypsies. Even the execution of the

prior shows humanity in that it transcends mere revenge. He decrees that he should not be burned as an act of vengeance, though the prior is one of those 'human fiends / Who carry hell for pattern in their souls' (SG, 332). Instead he is executed with due ceremony. But the poem recognizes, as perhaps Carlyle did not sufficiently, that there is always a risk that the visionary idealism of a Zarca can degenerate into, and become barely distinguishable from, the idealism of someone like the prior.

Although the poem may be sympathetic to Zarca's aim, it also shows external reality as being indifferent to human aspirations. Moral good must be projected onto a world in which value is not intrinsic, but the morally indifferent development of events can frustrate this. With Zarca's death, the only force that could hold the Gypsies together disintegrates and results in a kind of Gypsy diaspora. Zarca is the exemplification of Carlyle's view that the Byronic egotist must convert his rebellion and will assertion into devotion to the best interests of his society. This was one means of socially transforming Romantic egotism. But the poem suggests that the transcendentalism underlying Zarca's certainty in his vision is a less modern position than the state of alienated self-consciousness that afflicts both Silva and Fedalma. Although both Silva and Fedalma finally commit themselves to their respective cultural traditions, this does not heal their self-division, and it also deprives them of love. Their situation is doubly tragic, for another aspect of it is that though the negativity of alienated self-division is clear, any recovery of the sense of identity associated with a tribal consciousness is for them not only virtually impossible but also a state of consciousness that they can no longer feel as desirable.

This pessimistic conclusion is subject to revision when Eliot returns to some of the central issues of *The Spanish Gypsy* in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. There are obvious similarities between Zarca and the Gypsies and Mordecai and the Jews; Deronda's situation has similarities to Fedalma's, and the problem of Byronic egotism re-emerges in the characterization of Gwendolen and the princess. Eliot revises the tragic structure of the poem, for though Mordecai, like Zarca, dies he passes the torch on to Deronda who, though sceptical about prophecy and transcendentalist certainties, is happy to commit himself to the attempt to bring into being Mordecai's ideal. Deronda is able to do this not by overcoming alienation but by finding a way of positively transforming it so that it can give him sufficient mental space to make informed choices that he believes can further the progress of the world, though this is not without its problems as I shall discuss later. There is thus hope for the future even if it cannot be guaranteed – as Deronda is well aware – but in being able, self-consciously, to identify himself joyfully with Mordecai's vision he achieves mastery over the negative alienation to which he had previously been vulnerable, and that threatens the modern consciousness with self-division.

The Spanish Gypsy certainly deserves more attention than Eliot critics have given it. It makes explicit ideas and concerns that are also part of the novels but

which are less obvious because they are absorbed into their realist fabric. It also reveals Eliot as intellectually engaged with the preoccupations and concerns of European writers associated with post-Romanticism, an aspect of her which has been neglected by most commentators on her work who have tended to confine her within the tradition of the English social novel.