GEORGE ELIOT REVIEW

George Eliot's Debt to Richard Wagner: *Daniel Deronda* and *The Flying Dutchman*

Author(s): Victoria Addis

Original Source: Addis, Victoria. "George Eliot's Debt to Richard Wagner: *Daniel Deronda* and *The Flying Dutchman*." *George Eliot Review*, no. 52, 2021, pp. 42-50.

Digital editions of the *George Eliot Review* and the *George Eliot Fellowship Review* are published on behalf of the George Eliot Fellowship by the *George Eliot Review Online*, edited by Beverley Park Rilett, https://GeorgeEliotReview.org.

GEORGE ELIOT'S DEBT TO RICHARD WAGNER: *DANIEL DERONDA* AND *THE FLYING DUTCHMAN*

By Victoria Addis

Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), has often been seen as problematic, and for one major reason: the so-called Jewish storyline. The common sentiment that the novel was one of two distinct halves, one vastly superior to the other, was expressed most famously by F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (1948), where he refers to the Jewish plot as the 'bad half' of the novel (80), and proceeds to rename the 'good half', 'Gwendolen Harleth' (85). *Daniel Deronda*, however, is a brilliantly constructed narrative, in which *both* of the two interweaving storylines play an integral role. By considering this novel alongside the artistic debt George Eliot owed to the German composer, Richard Wagner, the necessity, and beauty, of the Jewish storyline is revealed. Moreover, in bringing together *Daniel Deronda*, and Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, Eliot's ongoing fascination with the composer, his works, and his theories of 'modern music', can be explored in all their many contradictions, and the Wagnerian aspects of Eliot's final novel can be further uncovered.

George Eliot was a contemporary of Richard Wagner and was heavily involved in the cultural scene surrounding European music in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Eliot took a great interest in music as a listener, and through her partner George Henry Lewes, she was to befriend many prominent musical figures of the era, not least the pianist and composer Franz Liszt. It was through this connection that Eliot and Lewes came to include Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima, Liszt's daughter, among their acquaintances. To all appearances, this seems to have been a happy acquaintance. In a letter to her friend Barbara Bodichon, dated 18 May 1877, Eliot writes 'we are in love with Mad. Wagner!' (Haight, 374). Lewes clearly shared this view when he wrote to Cosima herself: 'altogether the stirrings of the soul which the Meister's music and your personality excited in us will make the May of 77 ever memorable to us' (Skelton, 28). From her earliest encounters with Wagner as a musical theoretician and composer, however, Eliot engaged critically with his work, and her reaction to his music was, at best, mixed. She praised his grand mythological themes, his use of leitmotif, and his vision of the future of opera, but admitted to finding his works overlong, and her own musical ear ill-tuned to finding pleasure in his music.

This level of active engagement with Wagner and his operatic works filters into her construction of *Daniel Deronda*. Written between her trip to Weimar where she first met Richard Wagner and heard performances of his operas, and his subsequent trip to London where Eliot and Lewes entertained Wagner and his wife on a number of occasions, *Daniel Deronda* displays Eliot's ongoing

fascination with Wagner, his music, and perhaps most significantly, his ideas about music.

When, in 1854, George Eliot, along with her partner George Henry Lewes, travelled to Weimar, they found themselves amongst the early audiences of three of Wagner's operas: *Lohengrin*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *Tannhäuser*. During this visit, they came into the company of musicians and critics at the centre of discussions on new developments in musical expression, such as Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a 'complete' work that draws simultaneously on all major art forms, and his heightened use of leitmotif as a dramatic conceit. Through her 1855 essay, 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar', George Eliot became one of the first advocates for Wagner's music in England. In this essay, she displays her own critical understanding of his musical theories, as well as her personal reception of the music itself. What is clear from Eliot's essay is a deep engagement with Wagner's 'music of the future' on a theoretical level, and a simultaneous difficulty with the musical effect of these theories in practice. Eliot rallied against her conservative preferences, mocking her own limitation to the 'tadpole pleasures' (87) of traditional melody, as her ear struggled to appreciate the new music of Richard Wagner. Yet even in admitting that she was 'unable to recognise Herr Wagner's compositions as the ideal of the opera, and […] with a few slight exceptions, not deeply affected by his music on a first hearing' (85), Eliot affirms her support of some of Wagner's key ideas:

> It is difficult for me to understand how anyone who finds deficiencies in the opera as it has existed hitherto, can give fair attention to Wagner's theory, and his exemplification of it in his operas, without admitting that he has pointed out the directions in which the lyric drama must develop itself, if it is to be developed at all (85).

Despite this apparent contradiction between her theoretical and experiential reception of his works, Eliot does find some modest satisfaction in the experience of listening to Wagner. After discussing her issues with *Lohengrin*, she concedes that 'Certainly his *Fliegender Holländer* […] is a charming opera' (87). And it is this opera, in fact, which came to provide a model, in both structure and content, for her own novel, *Daniel Deronda*.

Eliot's novel tells the story of the young man, Daniel Deronda, an English gentleman with a secret Jewish heritage. Daniel witnesses the fripperies and underlying hostilities of English society in the circumstances of the proud and wilful Gwendolen Harleth, as he simultaneously uncovers his Jewish roots through the humble and diligent Mirah Lapidoth, and her brother, Mordecai, a Zionist and scholar of Jewish history. These two contrasting storylines are drawn together through one central commonality: opera. Opera figures heavily in the narrative of *Daniel Deronda* through both the drawing room singing of Gwendolen and

Mirah, and the faded star of Daniel's lost mother, but also through Eliot's use of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* as a template for the dramatic and thematic elements of her work, which pushes these musical elements beyond the purely diegetic.

The story of *The Flying Dutchman* follows a sea captain, known as the Dutchman, who is cursed to roam the sea forever as punishment for invoking Satan. His only hope of redemption is that every seven years he is allowed a brief return to land, where true love may break his curse. This pattern of absence and return, plays out across Eliot's novel between the two storylines, and the two separate worlds in which Daniel is involved. The figure of the Dutchman finds echoes in more than one of Eliot's characters, and the themes of isolation and displacement the figure embodies provide the bedrock for Eliot's discussions about a displaced Jewish culture, and wider discussions about the human condition. The most significant aspect of Wagner's work that Eliot's novel explores, however, is the pattern of unending recurrence that provides the novel's structure and narrative impulse.

The largest portions of Eliot's praise of Wagner are directed towards his adoption of mythic and poetic themes for his dramas, and in particular, his especial use of leitmotif:

> The artifice however, of making certain contrasted strains of melody run like coloured threads through the wool of an opera, and also the other dramatic device of using a particular melody or musical phrase as a sort of *Ahnung* or prognostication of the approach or action of a particular character, are not altogether peculiar to Wagner, though he lays especial stress on them as his own (Eliot, 89).

Eliot finds much to admire in Wagner's use of recurring musical themes, and it is a device that she herself seeks to employ throughout *Daniel Deronda*. The dead face that Gwendolen sees repeatedly, first behind the wainscot panel at Offendene, offers a premonition of that which comes to haunts her: the death of Grandcourt and her role in it. Like the so-called 'Dutchman theme' established by the French horns at the beginning of Wagner's opera, the image of the dead face is tied to the character of Gwendolen and to her fate. During Gwendolen's performance as Hermione, the panel opens to reveal a 'picture of an upturned dead face, from which an obscure figure seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms,' an image which reappears as a persistent memory after Grandcourt's death: 'a white dead face from which she was for ever trying to flee and for ever held back' (27). The recurrence of this image is one of a number of staged reappearances of objects, like the necklace Daniel recovers for Gwendolen that she later wears as a bracelet, and the repeated mentions of Daniel's ring before it is stolen. These repetitions act to draw the attention of the reader to the object, magnifying its significance.

These objects are established as symbols, which through repetition achieve a mythic, dramatic status in the narrative.

The structure of Eliot's novel is likewise centred on a series of dramatic and formal recurrences, a system of absenting and returning. In this way, it takes on as its foundation some of the same fundamental preoccupations as Wagner's opera. *The Flying Dutchman* has traditionally been understood as expressing the 'weariness of life', particularly in the repetitive intervals of the Dutchman's endless seven-year terms of wandering, and as such it is an opera about motifs, centred on the very dilemmas that make motifs necessary, namely temporal elongation and repetitive experience (Dames, 12). Like *The Flying Dutchman*, *Daniel Deronda* can be read as a novel about motifs, and also about endless cycles of isolation and searching for a home. As Gwendolen laments, 'Things repeat themselves in me so. They come back – they will all come back' (716). While this alludes primarily to her haunting by the dead face of Grandcourt, it could just as easily apply to her relationship with Daniel.

Eliot's novel begins with the meeting between Gwendolen and Deronda, each alive to the romantic possibility of the other. The novel then progresses along the two separate storylines of Deronda's quest to uncover his Jewish heritage, and Gwendolen's struggles in English society with her restrictive and controlling husband. As Barbara Hardy states:

> The complex plot is not merely a division into two actions but a division into two separate worlds, and Gwendolen's dependence on Daniel and her gradual recognition of the limits of worldliness increase as he moves gradually and irrevocably towards his Jewish world (112).

For Gwendolen, Daniel's appearances in her storyline are a repeating connection with another possible life. Like the Dutchman's periods of respite on the land, Gwendolen's time with Daniel allows her the tortured sight of an impossible freedom from the silent hell of Grandcourt's control. The pattern of meetings as they are experienced by Gwendolen is completely reversed for Daniel. It is not his time with her that offers respite, but the time he spends with both Mirah and Mordecai, which free him from the constraints of English society, and reveal to him the cause that he has been searching for.

As is the case with the motifs in Wagner's opera, Eliot's references to the Dutchman are not fixed in relation to one character or situation. In Wagner, a leitmotif can be played by different instruments at different tempos, dynamics, and in different moods to show how something has been transformed. Eliot uses this idea to full effect in *Daniel Deronda*, where her transplanting of the Dutchman's characteristics through different characters shows the Dutchman's isolation and ongoing quest for a home as a universal aspect of the human condition. Here, I will focus on just two iterations of the Dutchman within the

novel in the characters of Daniel and Gwendolen, though parallels can also be drawn with other characters, most especially, Herr Klesmer.[1]

The key theme of *The Flying Dutchman* is that of the Dutchman himself, caught between the ghost world of his ship and the reality of life on the land. In many ways, Daniel's circumstances mirror those of the ill-fated captain. As Barbara Hardy states, 'The imagery of loneliness and exile permeates the account of Daniel's progress' (128). He is caught between the English society he has grown up into and the Jewish world of which he eventually becomes a part. Suggesting this position from the outset, Eliot casts Daniel as an outsider to English society from the opening chapter. To those who don't know him, he is 'the dark haired young man […] with the dreadful expression' (8), and his name raises further suspicion as to his origin: 'What a delightful name! Is he an Englishman?' (9). Gwendolen is attracted to Deronda because of this very strangeness, remarking with evident pleasure that, 'I think he is not like young men in general' (9). Daniel's difference, then, marks him out from the others who inhabit the world he has grown up into, and while his Jewish heritage remains unclaimed, he wanders the novel in search of an identity. Neither Englishman nor Jew, Daniel, like the Dutchman, is trapped between worlds.

In her characterization, Gwendolen reflects two different characters from the Duchman story. Initially, Gwendolen is linked to *The Flying Dutchman*'s Senta; the young girl who fantasizes about a life with a man she knows only through his picture and the stories others tell; a girl who dreams of a more exciting life than the one she has without stopping to consider the consequences of any action. Eliot was undoubtedly influenced by this situation in her construction of Gwendolen. Describing *The Flying Dutchman* in her essay, she writes of one particular scene: 'Senta sinks into her chair, eager to hear the dream, but exhausted by her emotions, and during Eric's narration, seems gradually to enter into a state of *clairvoyance*' (92, original emphasis). This scene, as understood by Eliot, connects directly with Gwendolen's premonitions about Grandcourt's death, and the recurring phantom-like images of his dead face. Like Senta, Gwendolen's infatuation with the life she believes Grandcourt can provide is doomed. In her marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen displays the same recklessness as Senta, who abandons her life of domestic pursuits to follow an unknown path, but unlike Senta her fate is not to die as a romantic heroine, but to continue on in defeat and despair. As Barbara Hardy concludes:

> Part of the total effect of the novel is the treatment of the isolated figure. Daniel and Mirah are both Ishmaels, exiled from race and family, wandering and seeking, but at the end of the novel they are neatly restored to their lost world and the solitary figure is Gwendolen, left in the shock of a tragic isolation which breaks on the reader as well as the heroine when the diverging actions separate and leave Gwendolen without Daniel (113).

It is significant that the only direct reference to Wagner's opera comes from Gwendolen. Just before Grandcourt's death, she says 'I think we shall go on always, like the Flying Dutchman' (566). In many ways, this is prophetic. Gwendolen is doomed to repeat the final moments of Grandcourt's life forever in the haunting image of his dead face, just as she is left always with the promise of 'land': the promise of Daniel's return. It is Gwendolen, then, who is alone in the end, as Senta/Gwendolen becomes the Dutchman/Gwendolen, while Daniel and Mirah sail off into the distance.

Delia De Sousa Correa has written eloquently on the relationship between Eliot's writing and the opera. She lays the groundwork for a more targeted reading of *Daniel Deronda* in relation to specific operatic dramas by affirming that 'Eliot […] constantly sought to make explicit parallels between her work and that of opera' (176). Correa finds that in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot evokes the high drama of operatic situations through the use of devices and techniques usually considered to be unique to the opera, and draws analogies between her narratives and operatic works (173–6).

The scene of Grandcourt's drowning is one of the dramatic aspects of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* that most clearly invokes the high drama of opera. It is also the scene that most closely mirrors the action of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, in a clear inversion of its events. The final drama of Wagner's opera sees the young girl Senta prove her love to the disbelieving Dutchman by exclaiming that she is 'true till death' before throwing herself into the sea. Eliot's inversion of this drama sees Gwendolen's open hesitation in saving Grandcourt when he falls from the boat. The contrast between these two scenarios throws each into greater relief. Gwendolen is Senta disillusioned by her time spent under the yolk of an unsuitable man. Senta's leap to her death is a template for Gwendolen's thoughtless leap into marriage with Grandcourt, blinded to the realities of the relationship by the romance of an imagined life; Senta leaps from a position of unknowing innocence and naiveté, the same way Gwendolen first leaps into marriage. Yet, disillusioned by experience, Gwendolen does not move to help her drowning husband.

The comparison between Eliot's novel and *The Flying Dutchman* here offers an insight into Eliot's thinking about traditional relationships between men and women, and the consequences such gender relations can have. The romantic idealism society fosters in young women is harshly critiqued through Gwendolen's fortunes, and through the fortunes of Senta that this section also alludes to. In reading of Gwendolen's fate, we are led to believe that Senta's death in Wagner's opera has perhaps saved her from the greater misfortune of an unsuitable marriage. That this scene reveals a stance on the position of women in relation to men, and the societal expectation placed on these gender roles is further in evidence in the comments of the bystanders, who at first believe that it is Gwendolen who is dead.

The men gathered in the crowd suggest that Grandcourt ‘had probably taken his wife out to drown her, according to the national practice’ (569). Eliot’s subversion of the drama of Wagner’s opera allows her to make a statement in response to the original work, which itself can be reinterpreted through this relation.

So we see that not all of Eliot’s uses of Wagner are borne from a purely imitative artistic connection. Further to the subversion of some of the dramatic elements of *The Flying Dutchman*, Eliot also confronts some of Wagner’s theoretical positions. In particular his stance towards Jewish musicians. Eliot would have known, as early as the 1854 Weimar visit, of Wagner’s scandalous writings about Jewish composers. The issue of Wagner’s anti-Semitism was something that was taken up by many contemporary critics, yet it was an issue that Eliot had side stepped in her essays and private writings, only to face head on through the stark philo-Semitism of *Daniel Deronda.* It is through music that Eliot makes this point most explicitly. In a direct counter to Wagner’s views on the musical inadequacies of the Jewish people, Eliot invests her Jewish characters with a deep, almost mystical understanding of music that surpasses any of her English characters.

The contrast between English and Jewish sensibilities is most clearly marked in the reception of Catherine Arrowpoint’s and Herr Klesmer’s performance of a ‘four-handed piece on two pianos which convinced the company in general that it was long’ (41). The less than enthusiastic review of this performance contrasts the relative praise with which Gwendolen’s performance is received by her English audience. As Alison Byerly contends, this shows ‘the musical ignorance – and, by extension, general philistinism – of English society’ (10). Further to this, Eliot draws distinct moral lines between those characters who have a natural affinity for music, typically the Jewish characters, and those who do not. As Shirley Levenson states, ‘music, as we shall see, is associated in this novel with the expression of deep feeling’ (318). This division is best demonstrated through the comparison between saviour and villain, Deronda and Grandcourt, a division described in the novel in musical terms: Deronda’s voice, ‘heard now for the first time was to Grandcourt’s toneless drawl […] as the deep notes of a violoncello to the broken discourse of poultry’ (245). This contrast exists in less explicit terms, between the different approaches to musicianship shown by Mirah and by Gwendolen. In his disappointing review of Gwendolen’s performance, Klesmer remarks that ‘it is always acceptable to see you sing’ (38), later advising her that ‘the honour comes from the inward vocation and the hard-won achievement: there is no honour in donning the life as a livery’ (211). These references to appearance over substance cut to the bone of Gwendolen’s character. Gwendolen views music as an instrument rather than as the goal itself. This stands in contrast to the Jewish Mirah, for whom music is a natural gift pursued with humble determination and a willingness to work hard.

This sense of Mirah's deeper feeling for music is apparent from her first appearance in the novel when Daniel's singing, as he passes her in his rowing boat, draws her out of her suicide attempt (154). They communicate without need of words. This foregoing of language is also evident in Mirah's emotional rendition of the Hebrew songs that were passed down from her mother: 'There were always Hebrew songs she sang; and because I never knew the meaning of the words they seemed full of nothing but our love and happiness' (250). While Eliot never openly condemned Wagner's anti-Semitism, the treatment of the musical themes in *Daniel Deronda* offers a clear rebuke when read against his views, a notion supported by the several broader interconnections between Eliot's novel and the work of Richard Wagner I have attempted to outline here.

Eliot's interest in Wagner's operatic principles furnished her final novel with a structure of motives to support a longer form work, and with the high drama, and mythological underpinnings that made Wagnerian opera such a popular success. Reconsidering the Jewish element of the narrative in *Daniel Deronda* in relation to Wagner's influences reveals it to be a vital aspect of the novel's fundamental structure, without which the dramatic heights of the final sequence would fail to resonate. Viewing the novel as a response to Wagner, by turns appreciative and confrontational, unlocks new layers of interest in the dual narrative as a temporal mechanism, and promotes a deeper understanding of Eliot's responses to Wagner's music, and to his ideology, than can be found in her essays, letters, and journals.

NOTE

1 This connection between Klesmer and the character of the Dutchman has been made by scholars including Ruth Solie, who draw on parallels between the Dutchman and the biblical figure of the wandering Jew with whom Klesmer associates himself (Solie, 186).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Argyle, Gisela. *German Elements in the Fiction of George Eliot, Gissing, and Meredith*. Frankfurt: Peter D. Lang, 1989.

Byerly, Alison. '"The Language of the Soul": George Eliot and Music'. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 44.1, 1989, pp. 1–17.

Correa, Delia Da Sousa. 'George Eliot and the "Expressiveness of Opera"'. *Forum for Modern Language Studies,* 48.2, 2012, pp. 164–177.

Dames, Nicholas. 'Melodies for the Forgetful: Eliot, Wagner, and Duration'. *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of the Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, pp.124–165.

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. Great Britain: Wordsworth, 2003.

———. 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar'. *George Eliot Selected Critical Writings*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 82–109.

Grey, Thomas. *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Haight, Gordon S. ed. *The George Eliot Letters*. Vol. 6. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

Hardy, Barbara. *The Novels of George Eliot*. London: Athlone Press, 1973.

Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. 2nd Edition. New York: George W. Stewart Publisher Inc., 1950.

Levenson, Shirley Frank. 'The Use of Music in Daniel Deronda'. *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 24.3, 1969, pp. 317–334.

Picker, John M. *Victorian Soundscapes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

Rignall, John. *George Eliot and Europe*. Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011.

Skelton, Geoffrey. 'George Eliot and Cosima Wagner: A Newly Discovered Letter from George Henry Lewes'. *George Eliot Fellowship Review*, 13, 1982, pp. 25–32.

Solie, Ruth A. (2004) '"Tadpole Pleasures": *Daniel Deronda* as Music Historiography'. *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 153–86.