

'The Most Ordinary Prompting of Comparison'?: George Eliot and the Problematics of Whig Historiography

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Early in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', the concluding essay of George Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878) (and as such the finale of Eliot's literary career), the narrator introduces the historian J. R. Green. This is disguised in the apparently innocuous allusion to 'one of our living historians'.¹ At first glance it may not appear to be a particularly significant allusion, as Green was a popular historian of the mid-later nineteenth century. His *A Short History of the English People* (1874) achieved significant commercial success. Furthermore, George Eliot's own personal familiarity with Green's work at this particular point in her career can be established. *A Short History* featured in her notebooks² and, in a letter to her friend Eugène Bodichon, she noted how she was 'deep among the gravities now. I have been reading aloud Green's first vol. of his new larger History of the English People'.³ As such, an allusion to Green does not stand out as especially unusual.

However, the ramifications of Eliot's laudatory paraphrase of Green are distinctly significant. For this paraphrase centres, ostensibly, on Green's inherently questionable, quasi-mythical notion of English national history:

'Let us', he virtually says, 'let us know who were our forefathers, who it was that won the soil for us, and brought the good seed of those institutions through which we should not arrogantly but gratefully feel ourselves distinguished among the nations as possessors of long-inherited freedom, let us not keep up an ignorant kind of naming which disguises our true affinities of blood and language, but let us see thoroughly what sort of notions and

traditions our forefathers had, and what sort of song inspired them [...] these seafaring, invading, self-asserting men were the English of old time, and were our fathers who did rough work by which we are profiting.' (145)

What is significant and indeed ultimately problematic about this citation of Green is that the version of the English past which is encompassed is distinctly partisan. It is also highly suspect, for it is rooted in a rose-tinted myth of collective national progress, democracy, and liberty. It is just such a narrative of continuity and development as that most famously delineated by Herbert Butterfield, in his influential *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), and it will be central to the arguments made in this paper. Whiggish historiography will be seen as representing a broad philosophical alignment and sensibility, evident across a range of historical texts, by a variety of practitioners.

However, at the same time care is needed so as not to collapse nineteenth-century historical writing into a broad-church category labelled 'Whig historiography', one which would narrowly limit difference and privilege similarity. It is therefore acknowledged that factors such as subject field, methodology, social background, and the professionalisation of the discipline of History, are all relevant signifiers of difference. They divide historians such as Freeman, Green, Macaulay, Stubbs, and Acton from each other just as they do from other key nineteenth-century historians, such as Carlyle, Froude, or Gardiner (who are not to be the focus here). The historiography of this period is a polyphony of overlapping, whilst also distinctly individual voices.

Yet it is also clear that the Whig narrative of English history is predominant across a range of very different historical works. Even where differences of methodology or emphasis are ascertained, the broader thrust of the Whig view of the past often still shines through. Even Anthony Brundage, whose recent study of Green attempts to establish particularity by rescuing the historian from the pejorative label of 'Whig historian', cannot help but reinforce the connection:

while constitutional development was certainly an important theme in the *Short History*, Green's presentation of it stressed its connections to broader popular culture, and his analysis was markedly more radical than that of his Whiggish predecessors and contemporaries.⁴

He goes on to claim that Green 'enlivened the measured phraseology and expanded the limited framework of the Whig constitutional approach'.⁵ As such the difference is one of methodology and emphasis, but there is no attempt made to show how Green's broad conclusions contradict with those, say, of Freeman or perhaps Stubbs.

Within this discussion there will be much cross-referencing between the

writing of George Eliot and the works of Macaulay, Green, Freeman, Stubbs, and others. The aim will be to illustrate the extent to which George Eliot's perception of the English past accorded with, and was shaped by, the view prevalent in Whig historiography. As such the historians to be featured will be seen as representative (acknowledging their various differences) of a broad interpretation of the English past that is at heart 'Whiggish'; one which has generic similarities with that held up for public scrutiny by Butterfield so many decades ago. For one, as J. P. Kenyon has shown, these historians viewed history 'in the light of present politics'.⁶ Furthermore, even a professional historian such as William Stubbs, ever more fixated with the rigour and integrity of archival research, still succumbed 'with ease [to] the Whig theory of the Ancient Constitution'.⁷ The notion of the history of England these historians shared was one in which gradual but definable progress was evident, one in which constitutional democracy and personal liberty were the hallmarks, and one which illustrated clearly the continuity between England past and England present. It is a history that J. W. Burrow has called 'an invitation to national jubilation at which the shades of venerated ancestors are honoured guests'.⁸

From the outset there appears to be a definite incongruity in the presence of this historical narrative of English national identity within George Eliot's essay 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!'. This should be evident even to those with only a passing knowledge of her career and work. For, to rely on such a confidence-ridden encapsulation of national glory, what Dwight Culler has called a 'hymn of thanksgiving, a celebration of triumphal change',⁹ implies a certain confidence and faith in the nation. That an author renowned for her own personal scepticism and fragile confidence should privilege it is certainly puzzling. Eliot's motivation in citing Green is, at this stage, far from clear.

Furthermore, Eliot's reading of nineteenth-century history was in fact highly detailed, and her notebooks and letters reveal that she read and studied many historical works throughout her career. Quite why, in the light of this, she offers such a narrowly partisan (Whig) notion of English history may be unclear. Her deep familiarity with non-Whig or even anti-Whig historiography such as that written by Thomas Carlyle and Froude, both of whom openly disavowed the notion of a confident, liberty-driven national progress, appears to act as a counterbalance. However, the work of Macaulay, especially his *History of England*, was even more prominent in Eliot's studies of English history.¹⁰ The *History*, identified by Butterfield as 'a useful introduction to an enquiry into the origins of the Whig interpretation',¹¹ was read and re-read by Eliot and G. H. Lewes.¹² In a letter to another friend, Sara Hennell, Eliot wrote of Macaulay's *History*: 'I thought of Mr H. [Hennell] all through the book, as the only person I could be quite sure would enjoy it as much as I did myself'.¹³

Furthermore, it does appear as if the majority of the English historians that Eliot read tended to rely on a generically Whiggish model of the national

past, even if they did so in a less overt fashion than Macaulay. Freeman and Stubbs, for example, were studied diligently. Freeman's *Old English History for Children* (1869), 'Stray Thoughts on Comparative Mythology' (1870), and *Comparative Politics: Six Lectures at the Royal Institution*,¹⁴ all appear in Eliot's notebooks or on her reading lists. In addition, her knowledge of the written work of Stubbs was supplemented by a first-hand familiarity with the man and his views, as he was a friend of G. H. Lewes.¹⁵ Both of these historians portrayed a far less grandiose and celebratory history than Macaulay, and yet, in the final analysis there can be little doubt that the view of England's past that they offer has many features in common with Macaulay's narrative. As such there appears to be a dominating trend in George Eliot's reading of the nineteenth-century histories of England.

Certainly, the significance of the Whig myth of national identity to 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' goes beyond a single allusion to Green. In fact it is an essay *founded in* the Whig Interpretation of History. Consequently, it privileges all of the prejudices and discriminations inherent in it, as will become evident. It displays an innate nationalism, it sacrifices the value of the past to the needs of the present, and it is at times overbearing and complacent. This is particularly clear in relation to Eliot's attempt at representing, and thereby privileging, Jewry. For 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' is an essay in which the author confronts issues of national identity in an attempt to vindicate the position of Jewry, and also to deconstruct and ultimately undermine anti-Semitic prejudice. Yet she can only do so by elaborating on the interrelation of Judaism and a privileged notion of Englishness, thereby making a direct association between Whiggish progressivism and what Bryan Cheyette has identified as 'the prophetic politics of an authentic "chosen race"'.¹⁶ The consequences of so doing are acutely problematic.

The problematic nature of George Eliot's nationalism is evident from her use of Green. Effectively she employs what Haight calls a 'dubious analogy with the Anglo-Saxons' conquest of the ancient Britons'.¹⁷ This 'dubious analogy' is noteworthy for its blemished Whiggish complexion. Ultimately, it will be argued, Eliot's reliance on this Whig Interpretation fundamentally undermines her espoused commitment to both the improvement of Jewish rights and also to the contemporaneous movement for the restoration of Palestine. The problem is effectively one of divided loyalties, of trying to assist the Jewish national group whilst holding fundamental perceptions about Jewish history and culture that were fashioned from a dominating, colonising English ideological viewpoint. For what Eliot is unable to do is to fully recognise Jewish particularity, and thus throughout her essay she tends to subordinate Jewry to her mythical imaginings of the English past. The privileging of the Whig narrative will be seen as the chief manifestation of this.

Theophrastus Such, as narrator, begins 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' by attacking the 'prevalence of that grosser mental sloth which makes people

dull to the most ordinary prompting of comparison – the bringing things together because of their likeness’ (143). Though this is a far more simple mental exercise, he claims, than ‘the discerning of diversity amidst general sameness’ (143), the majority of English people are far more concerned with the latter than with the former. There is little or no attempt made amongst the population at large to appreciate or discern similarities between the Jewish people and the English, between the two cultural and religious traditions. Instead the surface differences are focused on and used as reasons to exclude and persecute the Jews. This is what he calls the ‘neglect of resemblances’ typical of ‘the prejudiced, the puerile, the spiteful, and the abysmally ignorant’ (143). Unless people begin to see the Jews as having a fundamental relationship with the dominant English majority instead of simply emphasising their difference, then such unfounded prejudice will never die out, he suggests.

George Eliot’s¹⁸ objective here is thus to focus on cultural and historical similarities rather than on differences, to view history as a unified and unifying totality. It is an intention akin to that stated, but also qualified, in her novel *Romola*, in which she notes how ‘we are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history’.¹⁹ This concentration on similarities across historical divides, an effective collapsing of difference and diversity into an ironed-out, present-centred narrative, is something typical of Whig historiography. Freeman, for example, concerned himself with the similarities that join peoples across geographical and chronological divides, and was little concerned with the differences that divide them. He stressed ‘the continuity of our national life’,²⁰ the way in which, despite internal and external upheavals such as wars or conquests, the ‘continued national life of the people [...] has remained unbroken’.²¹

In perceiving national historical experience as a smooth, linear narrative, Freeman insisted on a homogenous identity that marked out the characteristic English experience. One consequence of this is to allow easy contrast with what Edward Said calls the ‘strange regions of the world’²² that do not display discernible Western (English) characteristics. However, more fundamentally, the impact of this perception of homogeneity is to introduce what Karl Löwith calls ‘a meaning in history’, that is ‘a purpose or goal towards which the larger historical movements are aiming’.²³ History has a metanarrative, implying a direction and purpose that sanctions a particular mode of human existence, in this case English national identity.

The links between Jews and European nationals are clear, Theophrastus argues. He highlights, for example, the way in which the commonplaces of national identity, particularly spirit and consciousness, have been common to the histories of most national groups. The specific modern examples of the creation of a ‘free modern Greece’ (144), and also the unification of Italy in 1870 illustrate this. The essence and dynamic power of national identity is the social unit, the common populace, which accords with J. R. Green’s

contention that ‘the great impulses of national feeling, and not the policy of statesmen [...] formed the ground-work and basis of the history of nations’.²⁴ This broad-based national feeling is the determining factor in the actions of peoples and communities, and as such is the motor of historical change. Judaism, for Theophrastus, embodies the *ideal* of this form of national (self)consciousness.

The triumph of the priorities of this national consciousness over individualism is seen as the sign of a totalising national spirit. This continues a recurrent theme of George Eliot’s regarding the self-sacrifice required of individual citizens if they are to play their full role in the development of the national organism. It is a perception of individual and national existence reflected on by Gerald Newman in *The Rise of English Nationalism*. He notes: ‘nationalism is an ideology; its primary facts are facts of human consciousness; and its movement is towards an ideal if unattainable goal of uniform collective consciousness, and hence concerted discipline and action for the good of the whole’.²⁵ This is exactly the point being made by Eliot, that the chief effects of national identity are felt mentally/psychologically, spheres in which an individual must be subordinate. Indeed, Newman himself notes the similarity, identifying ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ as: ‘a fine exposition of this relationship between “national consciousness” and individual “self-repression and discipline”’. ‘It would be hard to find in the modern scholarly literature on nationalism’, he continues, ‘a more acute description of its psychological significance and shaping power’.²⁶

Thus the prerequisite for any one who wishes ‘to be harmoniously great’, Eliot contends, is to recognise such a sense of nationhood. The *nation* need not have a material existence in the present time, it can exist ‘in memory, as a departed, invisible, beloved ideal, once a reality, and perhaps to be restored’ (147), however the most important point is that it exists as a felt idea. ‘National consciousness’, as a totalising force or influence, is something that is inherent in ‘the nobleness of a nation’ (147), and also the *nobleness* of ‘each individual citizen’ (148). Moreover:

our dignity and rectitude are proportioned to our sense of relationship with something great, admirable, pregnant with high possibilities, worthy of sacrifice, a continual inspiration to self-repression and discipline by the presentation of aims larger and more attractive to our generous part than the securing of personal ease or prosperity. (148)

Eliot comes very close in this passage to delineating a notion of the ‘imagined communities’ of national identity conceptualised by Benedict Anderson. This nationality, he has argued, can never be any more than the sense of belonging to ‘an imagined political community’, with ‘imagined’ referring to a sense of being ‘both inherently limited and sovereign’.²⁷ The bonds that constitute a national identity are constructed, both culturally and individually.

Anderson's thesis is valuable for the way that he highlights the communal dimension of nationalism in a psychologico-spiritual sense; the way it is predicated on a notion of a shared, common, totalised existence. This leads him to view the rise of nationalism as coterminous with the fall of religion, with nationalism becoming a form of 'ersatz religion', where the nation exists as 'a substitute god'.²⁸ It is a logic similar to that played out in Green's definition of the hierarchy of nation and state. For him the nation is that all-consuming mental reality 'you can neither make nor destroy', with the state purely as artifice: 'accidental, it can be made or unmade, and is no real thing'.²⁹

Within his paraphrase of Green, Theophrastus points out that the nationalist struggles of foreign nations such as Greece and Italy have a connection to the historical plight of Jewry, that the battle for national liberty is an ongoing and common one. This is where Daniel Born, in *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel*, misreads Eliot. He claims that she 'puts the entire enterprise [of Zionism] within the context of successful Greek and Italian revolutionary upheaval'.³⁰ In fact, what she does is to position (and thus subordinate) the case for Zionist nationhood, and for that matter the independence struggles of Greece and Italy, within the context of a narrative of *English* history and national identity that is both mythical and highly partisan. The English people are placed at the summit of the pyramid of nations, as the 'strongly marked inheritors in language and genius of those old English seamen who, beholding a rich country with a most convenient seaboard, came, doubtless with a sense of divine warrant, and settled themselves' (145). The English are founded in a similar, and yet somehow superior, historically determined sense of national consciousness as the Jews:

They [the English forefathers] had virtues which incorporated themselves in wholesome usages to which we trace our own political blessings. Let us know and acknowledge our common relationship to them, and be thankful that over and above the affections and duties which spring from our manhood, we have the closer and more constantly guiding duties which belong to us as Englishmen. (145)

The sense of the divinity of the English nation is apparent. Even the language and imagery employed here compare with that evident in Whig historical writing. Theophrastus's reference to the 'good seed of those institutions', for example, is in tune with Freeman's comment as to how the 'lover of freedom, the lover of progress [...] need never shrink from tracing up the political institutions of England to their earliest shape'.³¹ It is also in keeping with his appreciation of how England 'has never been left at any time without a National Assembly of some kind or another'.³² The English parliament was viewed by Whiggish historians as 'immemorial. It grew step by step out of the older order of things', thus contrasting with the situation in France, where 'the older order of things utterly vanished'.³³ The 'good

seed' that Theophrastus refers to has sprouted forth in a way that has provided glory and national pride for the English. This originating aspect of the constitution of England has also sprouted forth in other directions for, in Freeman's words, it contained 'the germs of that out of which every free constitution in the world has grown'.³⁴ Because of this, there was a 'common political heritage which belongs alike to Swabia and to England',³⁵ in spite of the fact that the constitution was particularly suited to the English, and as such had taken on a more pronounced form in England than in any other country.

Theophrastus particularly values the way in which 'our fathers [...] did rough work by which we are profiting', and the way in which 'we have the closer and more constantly guiding duties which belong to us as Englishmen' (145). Thus there is a legacy handed down through the ages, one that demands responsibilities of successive generations. This view of the relations of past and present is implicit in Freeman's identification of English historical change as 'at once conservative and progressive – conservative because progressive, progressive because conservative'.³⁶ Tradition and the past are the foundations of all present change, and the national constitution is the precedent for all future action. The stress is on the ancient principles, those implicit in everything that the English forefathers stood for, and change has to be in accordance with these. As William Stubbs pointed out, 'the thread of national life is not to be broken'.³⁷ Historical change amounts to 'the careful repairs of an ancient building', and certainly should never go as far as 'the pulling down of an old building and the rearing up of a new'.³⁸

Ultimately, it is the inherent constitution of the Jewish people that is identified in 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!' as the aspect that most explains their resolution in the face of prejudice and oppression. It is the most important factor in their facility to maintain their national identity while hostile elements around them attempted to erase all traces of Jewishness. The phrase 'constitution of their race' (157), and particularly the notion of a national 'constitution' is poignant because of its semantic fluidity. At once it refers to an inherent quality that determines nature and character, whilst also to the relative healthiness, strength, and vitality of the physical and spiritual unit. These both have a resonance in terms of the especial resilience and resolution that the Jews are seen to have displayed in the face of persecution.

Furthermore, the term 'constitution' also introduces the notion of the fundamental principles according to which a nation, state or body politic is constituted and governed. Evidently, this latter sphere of meaning also relates to the notion of the constitution at the heart of the Whig perception of *English* national existence. This is resolutely constant: 'it has lived through many storms and it has withstood the attacks of many enemies', but 'it has never utterly died out'.³⁹ It provides for a narrative of constitutional resilience that begins with *Magna Carta*. This historical moment is seen by Freeman as when: 'England finally assumed those constitutional forms which, with mere

changes of detail, she has preserved uninterrupted ever since',⁴⁰ and by Green as illustrating 'the transition from the age of traditional rights [...] to the age of written legislation'.⁴¹ For Raphael Samuel, this makes the Great Charter a key signifier of a historical narrative of 'unified subject matter, consecutive narrative, familiar landmarks, well-marked periods and a sequence of causes and effects'.⁴² In effect, history and experience is totalised around key totems of national consciousness.

In highlighting the English as 'distinguished among the nations as possessors of long-inherited freedom', George Eliot effectively collapses English history into myth. As Freeman pointed out, this mythical history of England is one in which 'freedom is everywhere older than bondage'.⁴³ For him, by the time of the reign of Edward I, 'all the great principles of English freedom were already firmly established'.⁴⁴ Macaulay was even more explicit about the place of freedom in this narrative of history:

the law has never been borne down either by popular fury or by regal tyranny. Public credit has been held sacred. The administration of justice has been pure. Even in times which might by Englishmen be justly called evil times, we have enjoyed what almost every other nation in the world would have considered as an ample measure of civil and religious freedom. Every man has felt entire confidence that the state would protect him in the possession of what had been earned by his diligence and hoarded by his self-denial.⁴⁵

With England identified as the land of freedom, Theophrastus identifies the English to be 'a prosperous people' (146). He is keen to make the association not just between English history and liberty, but between English history and inherent progress, gradual and undeniable improvement. Each successive age thus builds on the labours and achievements of that preceding it, to the extent that the nation's history becomes a gradual revelation of (relative) national glory. As Macaulay cheered, with his celebratory totalising narrative of English progress: 'the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement'.⁴⁶ 'No man who is correctly informed as to the past', he went on, 'will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.'⁴⁷ This is a seductive and popular myth in which the 'originators' referred to as 'our fathers thirteen hundred years ago [who] worshipped Odin' (146), stand as central figures in the emergence and development of English national history and national identity.

Clearly acute difficulties accompany such an assertion of national improvement. George Eliot may not say so explicitly, but her perspective on English history implies a national and racial hegemony that is highly problematic. This is surprising bearing in mind it is set within the framework of a liberal campaign to overcome prejudice and remove social restrictions from

non-English national groups. The worst excess of the chauvinism inherent in this view is evident from Macaulay's laudation of England for its cultural achievement. Of the nations 'to which the human race owes art', he argues, all must concede that 'the stock bequeathed by them to us has been so carefully improved that the accumulated interest now exceeds the principle'.⁴⁸ England was perceived as having made a significant improvement on the standard of cultural achievement as a whole. Indeed, the very whiff of Englishness was enough to bring about a transformation of cultural stature, even to the extent that works translated into English were seen as having been improved in the process of so doing. The English language is thus identified as standing at the peak of the cultural-linguistic hierarchy.

The central flaw in the character of the modern Englishman, according to Theophrastus, is his failure to recognise and acknowledge a defined national consciousness as a positive aspect of Jewish history and culture. Such a national consciousness is valued in principle, and in relation to the English, yet it is ignored in relation to the Jews and Judaism. Thus there is no sympathy for another people that, in a tangible way, share a comparative sense of national identity and, moreover, are taking steps to return this national sense to its former glory in the form of a restored homeland. It is not that the Jews are absolutely the same as the English, more that once the 'superlative peculiarity' of the Jews is acknowledged, the 'affinity with them is only the more apparent' (148). English and Jewish origins share certain common features, with 'more likeness than contrast between the way we English got our island and the way the Israelites got Canaan' (150). Even English religious practice displays this influence, with the Jews' 'very verbal forms [...] on our lips in every prayer which we end with an Amen' (163). It is an influence vouchsafed by Lord Acton, who saw 'the Hebrew nation' as that which 'laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has been won',⁴⁹ the 'doctrine of national tradition and the doctrine of the higher law'.⁵⁰

The connection between English and Jewish history is found by Theophrastus to be most evident during the period of the English Revolution. This was a time when 'the Puritans, asserting their liberty to restrain tyrants, found the Hebrew history closely symbolical of their feelings and purpose' (150). It is just the relationship reflected on by Linda Colley in *Britons: Forging the Nation*, when she notes the predominance of the 'apocalyptic interpretation' within English historiography, 'in which Britain stood in for Israel'⁵¹ as a means of 'calling for radical change'.⁵² At a fundamental level the founding principles of both the English and Jewish nations were deemed compatible; the Civil War, the catalyst for increased liberty and constitutional justice, is closely related to the wisdom and divinity of Hebrew writings.

Thus Puritanism is simultaneously identified as both closely related to the sentiment and philosophy of ancient Jewish writing, and also as being at the heart of English national development. For Green it was the 'one dominant

influence [that] told on human action', and 'the whole temper of the nation felt the change'⁵³ and, as such, 'the whole history of English progress [...] on its moral and spiritual sides' can be seen as 'the history of Puritanism'.⁵⁴ Within the *world-view* of the Whig narrative of history, Englishness and Jewishness are, in this way, closely related: 'We must rather refer the passionate use of the Hebrew writings to affinities of disposition between our own race and the Jewish' (150). These 'affinities of disposition' link the English 'ancestors who resisted the oppressive acts of our native Kings' and 'by resisting rescued or won for us the best part of our civil and religious liberties' (151), with those 'brave and steadfast men of Jewish race' (151), who fought for the same principles in the history of their own people.

The fundamental Jewish strength, the reason the Jewish national spirit has survived in spite of the fact that its people have long been dispersed amongst the countries of Europe, and have suffered widespread abuse and maltreatment, is seen as a 'predominant kindliness'. This 'must have been deeply ingrained [...] to have outlasted the ages of persecution and oppression' (157). Evidently this is something that compares with Macaulay's assessment of the national *kindness* that marked the progress of the *English* people. 'It is pleasing to reflect that the public mind of England has softened while it has ripened, and that we have, in the course of ages, become, not only a wiser, but also a kinder people', he says.⁵⁵ What is crucial here is that there is seen to be a further underlying compatibility of sensibility and temperament between the Jewish and the English, one that is apparent in spite of the fact that both peoples have at times faced distinctly different historical circumstances.

The adhesive that binds the English in their common national consciousness, Theophrastus concludes, is the belief that 'England itself shall not be subject to foreign rule'. This is because 'there is a national life in our veins [...] there is something specifically English which we feel to be supremely worth striving for, worth dying for, rather than living to renounce it' (160). In spite of all the differences that may be present, in the final analysis Englishness brings with it certain loyalties and responsibilities. Thus he looks to a national history that is totalising in its fundamental assumptions and perspectives. This is something identified by Macaulay as 'the spirit of Englishmen, that sturdy spirit which no king of the House of Stuart could ever be taught by experience to understand, swelled up high and strong against injustice'.⁵⁶ The point George Eliot appears to be making is that, for her, English history centres on a notion of national identity that acts to unite individuals within the national unit in a way similar to that apparent in Jewish history. She lauds this sense of unity, of totality, as the ideal, and in highlighting the sense of national consciousness that the English share with Jews she tends towards viewing them as part of the same narrative, and thus a comparable, equitable, totality.

However, this is not a relationship of equals. Throughout 'The Modern

Hep! Hep! Hep!’ there is an overriding assumption (and indeed assertion) that Jewishness is implicitly subordinate to Eliot’s ideal of Englishness. This is something rooted in the overarching rationale of her literary fictions. For it was Eliot’s intention to ensure that her readers felt sympathy for her subject matter, whether it was ‘common’ people, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Methodists, or fifteenth-century Florentines. In the case of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), significantly, sympathy was to be inspired for the Jews in just the same way. She wished, as she revealed to David Kaufmann, to ‘contribute something to the ennobling of Judaism in the conception of the Christian community’. The aim was that her readership would arrive at a ‘clear perception of the relation between the presentation of the Jewish element and those of English social life’.⁵⁷ As George Henry Lewes argues, in a letter to Eliot’s publisher John Blackwood: ‘I have reflected that [as] she formerly contrived to make one love Methodists, there was no reason why she should not conquer the prejudice against the Jews’.⁵⁸ Blackwood’s subsequent response illustrates the perceived parallel of her portrayal of Jewry in *Daniel Deronda* and her portrayal of English characters in previous fictions: ‘your intuitions as to Jewish character are as true as all the world admit them to be when you are painting your own countrymen and women’.⁵⁹

However, these apparently noble motives should not disguise the fact that, in seeking to widen sympathy for Jewry, what Eliot actually does is supply the reader with an accommodation of Judaism into a dominant and dominating narrative of the English past. She privileges a particular notion of Judaism and Jewish history that does not challenge, and indeed is ultimately appropriated by, an ideal of English national identity that is derived from the influence of Whig historiography. Thus she falls into the trap of what Edward Said has identified as Western European Orientalism, the ‘way of coming to terms with the Orient’ that is ‘based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience’.⁶⁰ This Orientalist perspective is characterised by certain typifying, stereotyping, and totalising tendencies seen as prevalent in Western culture, especially as it attempts to come to terms with nations and peoples of the East. As such Eliot’s ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’, stands as what Said identifies as ‘an acceptable [to the West] grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness’.⁶¹

The problem is created in part, I would argue, by the fact that the plight of the Jews in England during the nineteenth century had become bound up with liberal notions of social and civil progress. Effectively it was an important plank of the liberal political agenda during this period, an agenda that was profoundly Anglo-centric. This identified the restoration of the Jews to Palestine as an ultimate triumph of English liberty, largely because it was a restorative project that was rooted in a Western myth asserting the unqualified right of a people to collective freedom. The relationship between Macaulay and the campaign to remove civil restrictions from the Jews in the 1830s illustrates this. His essay ‘Civil Disabilities of the Jews’ is seen to be a

seminal work, defining the parameters of the entire debate about the Jews, and 'the main statement of the Jewish case'.⁶² And yet, implicit in Macaulay's argument was his notion of Whig Protestant Englishness. He viewed Jewish emancipation as necessary because of the favourable light it would shed on the English nation, and by supporting the removal of Jewish disabilities he felt he was 'supporting the honour and the interests of the Christian religion'.⁶³

As such, the chief consequence of George Eliot's attempt to conceptualise Judaism and Jewry so as to promote sympathy and understanding amongst her English reading-public was that she undermined Jewish national identity in the name of a Whig narrative of Englishness. Her assertion of Judaic particularity was fundamentally weakened because her perception of Jewish history was as a trope of an idealised English past. This Jewish trope was one in which the symbiosis of national and individual consciousness at the heart of the Whig Interpretation of English history was translated into a narrative of Judaism. In *Daniel Deronda*, this tropic, romanticised Jewish nationalism usurps the dominant position of the English, who are pilloried for their moral bankruptcy and sloth. Eliot rejects the perceived intellectual and spiritual vacuum of modern England for her own Jewish organic ideal, and thus she transports Deronda out of the bankrupt English upper-class and sends him on a restorative project of Jewish national glory. However, because this organic ideal is fundamentally a troped Whig-English one, the overall effect is that Eliot paradoxically implies that England 'past' represents the paradigm for an ideal national existence, whilst at the same time countering this with an assertion that it is only the Jews (or rather her own idealised notion of Jewry) who have the potential to live up to this paradigm.

So, in spite of the detailed research that contributed to her understanding of Jewish history and culture, marking George Eliot's concerted attempt to be authentic, her perception and depiction of Judaism was inevitably problematic. Inherent and yet silent in both the justification of the Jewish plot of *Daniel Deronda*, and also the positioning of Jewry in her final essay, was a particular perception of England and the English past. Judaism is justified as relevant and significant because of the way in which it compares to, and can be contained within, an idealised narrative of Englishness. As Christina Crosby rightly points out in *The Ends of History*, as 'objects' of investigation Eliot's Jews are thus 'stripped, exposed, [and] discarded in a thoroughly objectifying operation'.⁶⁴ Her *recognition* of Judaism is one fundamentally weakened by an accompanying implicit motivation 'to *overcome* it, to *transcend* it, [and] to *spiritualize* it in making it over into something else [my italics]'.⁶⁵ It is this 'something else' that illustrates the pervasiveness, the profound seductiveness, and the sheer contentiousness of the myth-like Whig Interpretation of History, even for a writer as sceptical, and as intellectually rigorous, as George Eliot.

Notes

1 G. Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (London, 1994), p. 144. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets. Nancy Henry, the editor of this recent edition of the text, also identifies this reference to Green, p. 144 (fn. 6).

2 See W. Baker (ed.), *Some George Eliot Notebooks: An Edition of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library's George Eliot Holograph Notebooks, MSS 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, Vol. III* (Salzburg, 1985), p. 118.

3 GE to Mme Eugène Bodichon, London, 17 January 1878, *George Eliot Letters, Vol. VI*, edited by G. Haight (London, 1954), p. 6.

4 A. Brundage, *The People's Historian: John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (Westport, Connecticut, 1994), p. 2.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

6 J. P. Kenyon, *The History Men* (London, 1983), p. 154.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

8 J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 3.

9 A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (London, 1985), p. 38.

10 See J. Wiesenfarth (ed.), *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook (1854–1879) and Uncollected Writings* (Charlottesville, 1981); 'Entry 43' cites chapter 3, vol. 1 ('The State of England in 1685'). See also W. Baker (ed.), *The George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Library: An Annotated Catalogue of their Books at Dr. Williams's Library, London* (London, 1977). The latter reveals that Eliot was also distinctly familiar with works written about Macaulay. These included François Auguste Marie Mignet's *Éloges Historiques: Jouffray, Baron de Gerando, Laromiguière, LaKaaal, Schelling, Comte Portalis, Hallam, Lord Macaulay* (1864) and John Paget's *The New 'Examen': On Certain Passages in Macaulay's History on W. Penn: Duke of Marlborough and Glencoe* (1861).

11 H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge, 1944), p. 5.

12 On several occasions G. H. Lewes's journal mentions Macaulay. For example, see *George Eliot Letters, Vol. III*, p. 392 (fn. 8) 'Polly read Macaulay as we sat under the cliff', and also *Letters, Vol. VI*, p. 240 (fn. 9): 'Polly unwell and kept in bed. Sat with her the greater part of the day – read aloud papers and Macaulay's *Life*'. Both *History of England* and the article 'Machiavelli' (*Edinburgh Review*, XCV (March 1827)) are also listed in J. C. Pratt and V. A. Neufeldt (eds), *George Eliot's 'Middlemarch' Notebooks* (Berkeley, California, 1979), p. 284.

13 GE to Sara Sophia Hennell, Foleshill, 4 February 1849, *George Eliot Letters, Vol. I*, p. 275.

14 The first two texts are listed in Pratt and Neufeldt (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 214 and p. 282. The third is in Baker (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 68.

15 The GHL Diary of 19–21 May, 1877, reads: '16 again at dinner – Stubbs, Bradley, Sir C. Trevelyan, Butcher etc.', *George Eliot Letters, Vol. VI*, p. 375.

16 B. Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1875–1945* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 50.

17 G. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 522.

18 An assumption is being made here that the narrative voice of Theophrastus is indistinguishable from George Eliot's own. This close relation of narrative persona and author is confidently asserted by Frederick Karl in his recent biography of Eliot when he notes that the essay is 'full of Eliot's own perspectives', *George Eliot: A Biography* (London, 1995), p. 605.

19 G. Eliot, *Romola* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 44.

20 E. A. Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution: From the Earliest*

Times (London, 1872), p. vii.

- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 18
- 22 E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1994), p. xiii.
- 23 K. Löwith, 'The question of meaning in history', in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, edited by Arnold Levinson, (Evanston, Ill., 1966), p.131.
- 24 Alice Stopford Green, introduction to J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London, 1898), Vol. I, p. xix.
- 25 G. Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (London, 1987), p. 55.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 27 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London, 1983), p. 15.
- 28 H. Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (London, 1977), p. 465.
- 29 Alice Stopford Green, introduction to Green, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. xvii.
- 30 D. Born, *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel* (London, 1995), p. 53.
- 31 Freeman, *op. cit.*, 1872, p. 19.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 37 W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England In Its Origin and Development* (London, 1967), Vol. III, p. 634.
- 38 Freeman, *op. cit.*, 1872, pp. 55–6.
- 39 Freeman, *op. cit.*, 1872, p. 18.
- 40 E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest, Vol. I* (Oxford, 1870), p. 6.
- 41 Green, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 240.
- 42 R. Samuel, 'Continuous National History', in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Vol. 1: History and Politics* (London, 1989), p. 10.
- 43 Freeman, *op. cit.*, 1872, p. viii.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 45 T. B. Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II, Vol. I* (London, 1861), p. 280.
- 46 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 3.
- 47 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 3.
- 48 T. B. Macaulay, 'Lord Bacon', in *Literary Essays Contributed to the 'Edinburgh Review'* (London, 1923), p. 301.
- 49 Lord Acton, Preface to *The History of Freedom and Other Essays*, edited with an introduction by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London, 1907), p. 4.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 51 L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London, 1992), p. 31.
- 52 Colley, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
- 53 Green, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 937.
- 54 Green, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 1285.
- 55 Macaulay, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 424.
- 56 Macaulay, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 304.
- 57 GE to David Kaufmann, London, 31 May 1877, *George Eliot Letters, Vol. VI*, p. 379.

58 GHJ to John Blackwood, London, 1 December 1875, *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 196.

59 John Blackwood to GE, St. Andrews, 7 September 1876, *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 281.

60 E. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), p. 1. It would be a mistake not to acknowledge the potential difficulties of utilising Said's work in relation to Judaism; the thrust of his critique of Orientalist discourse speaks most overtly of the representation of the Middle Eastern, and particularly Palestinian national groups. However, there is nothing inherent in Said's critique that should exclude a discussion of the Orientalism inherent in Western appropriations of Judaism and Jewish experience.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

62 Introduction to T. B. Macaulay, *Essay and Speech on Jewish Disabilities* (Edinburgh, 1909), p. 10.

63 Macaulay, 'A Speech: Delivered in a Committee of the Whole House of Commons', 17 April 1833, *op. cit.*, 1909, p. 59.

64 C. Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and 'The Woman Question'* (London, 1991), p. 15.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 27.