

# Literary Transmigration George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Spirit of Transatlantic Exchange

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**Abstract** Reading several letters from the eleven-year correspondence alongside *Dred* and *Daniel Deronda*, this paper argues that the model of transatlantic spiritual communication presented by Stowe and Eliot's epistolary friendship takes on a new and potentially radical light when applied to the concept of a transnational and post racial spiritual community. Each text fundamentally challenges the ability of the realist novel to depict a nuanced understanding of racial identity through the use of spiritualist and religious discourse and imagery.

**Keywords** George Eliot. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Spiritualism. Mysticism. Transatlantic literature.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Literary Transmigration and the Afterlives of Texts. – 3 Insurrectionary Spirits: Racial and Mystical Communion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*. – 4 A "Sense of the Universal": Mesmeric Cosmopolitanism in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. – 5 "[A] Yearning Disembodied Spirit, Stirred with a Vague Social Passion": Literary, Spiritual, and Racial Communion.



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## 1 Introduction

In the sixth book of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Mordecai, George Eliot's Jewish prophet, explains to the novel's eponymous hero Daniel the Kabbalistic doctrine of the pre-existence of the human soul and its ability to "transmigrate" or move into other bodies, uniting to a "fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished" (540). Once united, these souls "will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom" (540). While Mordecai imagines a much higher purpose for these circulating souls than transatlantic reprints, translations, and unauthorised sequels, the image of constantly moving, transforming, and relocating souls can easily be mapped onto the circulation, reception, and adaptation of literary texts. Interestingly, as several reviews and personal letters reveal, for George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose second novel *Dred; A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856) may have served as inspiration for Eliot's own 'race novel', it is not only the movement or reception of the text that carries the potential for spiritual communion, but also the physical object of the book itself. Eliot and Stowe's transatlantic correspondence exemplifies a form of literary communication that can be likened to spiritual communion.

Reading several letters from the eleven-year correspondence alongside *Dred* and *Daniel Deronda*, I argue that the model of transatlantic spiritual communication presented by Stowe and Eliot's epistolary friendship takes on a new and potentially radical light when applied to the concept of a transnational and post racial spiritual community. Since Stowe initiated their transatlantic correspondence following Eliot's favourable review of *Dred* in the *Westminster Review* in 1856 and the period of their communication coincides with the composition and publication of Eliot's final novel, it is not surprising that their letters in some ways echo their narrative techniques. *Dred; A Tale of the Dismal Swamp*, which was published simultaneously in the US and Britain, features several plot devices and characters that are remarkably similar to Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*.

While the novels' thematic and structural similarities have been catalogued in work by Daniel Hack (2013), it is not the novels' formal affinities but rather their use of spiritual communion as a blueprint for post-racial and global communities that concerns this project. I am primarily interested in how each text fundamentally challenges the ability of the realist novel to depict a nuanced understanding of racial identity through the use of spiritualist and religious discourse and imagery. Both *Dred*, the eponymous "hero" and the prophet of the "swamp", and Mordecai, Eliot's Kabbalistic Jewish prophet who transmits his spiritual mission to Daniel, have been dismissed by nineteenth-century and current scholarship as unsubstantial, ab-

stracted figures who do not fit comfortably within the narratives they inhabit.<sup>1</sup> However, if we examine both texts as exemplars of what I call spiritual realism, it becomes clear that the ‘halves’ of each novel are not in fact disjointed but rather, as Eliot maintained in response to the critical bifurcation of her novel, that “everything in the book [is] related to everything else there”.<sup>2</sup>

Stowe’s deployment of spiritual realism reveals the hypocrisy of American religious institutions that implicitly accept slavery in the South while preaching the gospel, as well as to rehabilitate the figure of the male slave from her allegedly emasculating depiction of “Uncle Tom”. Eliot’s use of supernatural and spiritualist discourse in a novel that has otherwise been designated as a work of psychological realism<sup>3</sup> is intimately connected to concepts of identity, both individual and national, that make it a rich text to examine in a transatlantic context. According to Sarah Willburn, Pamela Thurschwell, and James Caron, Eliot’s text does not simply advocate for the creation of a Jewish nationalism, but rather employs Mordecai’s visions as a way to gesture toward the concept of a world community. By highlighting the ecumenical history that links all people, Eliot suggests that a transnational community could be maintained on the grounds of “humanity’s essential unity”.<sup>4</sup> Mordecai’s discussion of the transmigration of souls implies a circulation, relocation, and movement that is also inherent in our understanding of the transatlantic nineteenth-century literary sphere. Thus, Eliot pushes Stowe’s vision of the intersection between racial identity and spirituality a step further, suggesting that this vital mysticism can connect and invigorate not only the African American slave community but a global community as well.

In a letter to Stowe dated October 29, 1876, barely two months after the final of the eight monthly instalments of *Daniel Deronda* was published by *Blackwoods* and *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* simul-

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1 For more on the reception of *Daniel Deronda* and *Dred* see Cognard-Black 2004 and Mullaney 2011.

2 Letter to Madame Bodichon, October 2, 1876 (Eliot 1995, 6: 290).

3 In “George Eliot’s Prophecies: Coercive Second Sight and Everyday Thought Reading”, Pamela Thurschwell suggests that Eliot must turn to the occult or supernatural in order to “represent the workings of the human mind realistically, through all its sudden turns, unwanted memories and unconscious desires” (2004, 91). In “Fiction as Vivisection: G.H. Lewes and George Eliot”, Richard Menke, when discussing Eliot’s novella *The Lifted Veil*, similarly suggests that “realist fiction may, without forgoing its realism pretend to give us access to something we never encounter in real life – the unspoken thoughts of the other” (2000, 630).

4 According to James Caron, Eliot’s Mordecai is not simply a figure for Zionism but rather represents a movement for global unity: “Most of Mordecai’s thoughts are not so much those of a patriotic Jew with a nationalist’s feeling, as those of a visionary who sees Judaic tradition as a symbolic nucleus for a future world” (1983, 8).

taneously, Eliot reflects upon the mixed and somewhat lackluster response to the 'Jewish element' of her final novel. Surprised that her "race novel" did not create "much stronger resistance, and even repulsion, than it has actually met with", Eliot reveals that she "felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to" and that there was

nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. (Eliot 1954, 6: 301)

Such an inspiration seems to hint at her attempt to translate and extend what she calls Stowe's "grand element" in her October 1856 review of *Dred*. Declaring first that "Mrs. Stowe has *invented* the Negro novel", Eliot goes on to suggest that the most remarkable aspect of Stowe's latest work is its "exhibition of a people to whom what we may call Hebraic Christianity is still a reality, still an animating belief, and by whom the theocratic conceptions of the Old Testament are literally applied to their daily life".<sup>5</sup> Such a description could easily be applied to Eliot's Mordecai, Mirah, and Daniel. Although comparisons between biblical Jews and American slaves abound in both abolitionist texts and nineteenth-century African American literature, Eliot's translation of Stowe's "Hebraic Christianity" to a Kabbalistic and more "ancient" form of Judaism hints at a universal spiritual connection that seems to transcend both race and religious dogma.

## 2 Literary Transmigration and the Afterlives of Texts

In a letter dated May 25, 1869, Stowe writes to Eliot about the transformative power of reading her novels. According to Stowe,

[a] book is a hand stretched forth in the dark passage of life to see if there is another hand to meet it. Now in your works if you could read my marked edition of them you would see how often the hand has met the kindred hand. (quoted in Cognard-Black 2004, 1)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For Eliot's entire review see "Belles Lettres". *The Westminster Review*, 66.130, October 1856, 566-82.

<sup>6</sup> Selections of the original correspondence between Stowe and Eliot can be found in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

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Here the physical object of the book becomes the ‘medium’ through which spiritual communication can occur. This emphasis on the role of ‘hands’ in the transmission and interpretation of messages calls to mind the nineteenth-century spiritualist instrument, the planchette. A predecessor to the Ouija board, the planchette was operated by séance participants placing their hands upon a heart-shaped piece of wood that was equipped with a pencil and attached to two small wheels. Once a spirit was summoned, the planchette would slowly move, writing out the otherworldly message. The physical contact of the believers’ hands upon the instrument was seen as crucial in order to establish spirit communication, suggesting a complex relationship between the material body and immaterial ‘writing’. For Stowe, Eliot’s books call forth to the reader and become one with her, in the same sense that Mordecai and Daniel’s souls become one through transmigration. Although Stowe juxtaposes this type of spiritual and sympathetic communion with the “dreary” and “unsympathetic” “[r]eviews and book notices”, Henry James’s unsigned review of the first instalments of *Daniel Deronda* employs a similar language of spiritual transmission. Published in the *Nation* on February 24, 1876, the review suggests that

[t]he ‘sense of the universal’ is constant, omnipresent [...]. [I]t gives us the feeling that the threads of the narrative, as we gather them into our hands, are not of the usual commercial measurement, but long electric wires capable of transmitting messages from mysterious regions. (363)

Here James not only evokes the cables of the telegraph, a device that can literally transmit electric currents-turned-messages across the ocean, but he also transforms the text into a medium not unlike the spiritual mediums of popular séances.

In both Stowe’s letter and James’s review the materiality of the text is highlighted and it is the job of the reader’s “hands” to reach for the meaning of the literary work, suggesting that the text and the reader must work together in order for the meaning to be properly received. Eliot expresses a similar sentiment in her review of J.A. Froude’s *The Nemesis of Faith* in 1849:

on certain red-letter days of our existence, it happens to us to discover among the spawn of the press, a book which, as we read, seems to undergo a sort of transfiguration before us. We no longer hold heavily in our hands an octavo of some hundred pages, over which the eye laboriously travels, hardly able to drag along with it the restive mind; but we seem to be in companionship with a spirit, who is transfusing himself into our souls. (*Coventry Herald and Observer*, quoted in Price 2012, 265)

Here the materiality of the book disappears as the reader becomes one with the 'spirit' of the text, rendering the physical object obsolete.

Stowe's first letter to Eliot suggests that the two authors share a bond that implies the 'ideal' spiritual connection between reader and text. Stowe assures Eliot that, as she reads her novels and composes letters to her, "my soul is walking as it often does along side [sic] of your soul" (quoted in Springer 1986, 61). For Stowe, writing and reading become not only a means of literal communication but also spiritual connection. In a letter dated May 25, 1869, Stowe expresses her "love" for Eliot, writing "I love you - and talk to you sometimes when I am quite alone so earnestly that I should think you must know it even across the ocean" (80). Recognising the physical distance that separates them, Stowe implies that even simply thinking about or 'talking to' Eliot materialises their bond.

More explicit than Stowe's intimations of the spiritual bond that unites her to Eliot are her attempts to convince the British author of the validity of spiritualist practices. There is still an underlying focus on the ability of such communication to bridge the distance, both geographical and spectral, between great literary minds. In a letter written on May 11, 1872, Stowe relates her spiritual encounter with Charlotte Brontë through the assistance of a planchette. Through the planchette, Stowe is able to participate in a transatlantic and transworldly community of letters. Answering Stowe's question "Charlotte, you loved 'Shirley' better than any of your other works, did you not?" Brontë responds, "Yes; it was nearer and dearer to me than all. That is why I was so grieved at the severity of some criticisms. They called it coarse, - God forgive them!" (quoted in Cotugno 2006, 112). Not only is the 'spirit' of Brontë still troubled by past reviews of her work, but her spirit seems to be aware of the material literary market. When Stowe later asks Brontë why she has "crossed the seas to America" to interest herself in her séance, Brontë responds that "I know no England, or America, now" (112). In this mediated account from Brontë, national boundaries no longer exist in the spiritual realm.

In a way literalising this metaphor of literary transmigration, the transatlantic circulation of Stowe's first anti-slavery text and of Stowe herself during her tours abroad are also linked to the spread of the spiritualist movement. In the same way that the meaning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shifted with its publication in Britain,<sup>7</sup> Stowe herself became an international phenomenon when she arrived in England. Kohn, Meer, and Todd note that 'Uncle Tom mania' coincided with the arrival of the spiritualism craze. In 1853, Mary Howitt directly compared Stowe to spiritualism, writing to her husband Wil-

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the transatlantic reception and appropriation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Meer 2005 and Fisch 2000.

liam that “the great talk now is Mrs. Stowe and spirit rapping, both of which have arrived in England” (xxiv). As Alex Owen points out, 1852 was not only the year in which Stowe published her bestselling novel, but it was also the same year that Mrs. Hayden, an American spiritualist who had moved to London, began to advertise her services as a spiritual medium. Only one year later in 1853, Stowe began her lecture tour of England, arriving in the very midst of the growing spiritualist phenomenon. Thus, the popular practice of spiritualism, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Stowe herself are all American imports that become the talk of English society in the early 1850s.

Just as Stowe’s texts and persona were coopted by spiritualism, Eliot was often depicted as having a mystical or spiritual power through her novels. According to Jennifer Cognard-Black: “Eliot herself was defined in [...] periodicals as a writer who could see humanity through a universal lens [...] in review after review of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot was cast as a kind of mystic and immortal soul-maker” (109). Mimicking the transatlantic literary community of spirits that Stowe gathered around her planchette, the works of Stowe and Eliot, as well as their personas as authors, have a transatlantic afterlife of their own, taking on new print forms and circulating to new ‘souls’ but always maintaining a connection to the original spirit that envisioned them. The fact that in the spiritual realm, and even in the literary world, there are no national boundaries, only further highlights why Stowe and Eliot would mobilise such moments of spiritual and mystical communion in their fiction as a way to represent the potential for transgressing earthly boundaries, particularly those determined by race and class.

### 3 Insurrectionary Spirits: Racial and Mystical Communion in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred*

By the time *Dred; A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* was published in 1856, four years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had emerged as one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe was an international sensation. Although countless British and American texts had crossed the Atlantic before it, for many scholars Stowe’s first novel ushered in a new age of transatlantic literary exchange. According to Sarah Meer, the “celebrity” of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “both evoked and inspired” an unprecedented bidirectional circulation of print (2005, 197). Although not as popular as its predecessor, Stowe’s second race novel sold “upwards of 200,000 copies” (Levine in Stowe 2000, ix), reaching an eager and at times critical audience in both the United States and England. Despite Eliot’s oft-quoted praise of *Dred*’s plot for containing “that grand element – conflict of races” and for Stowe’s ability to allow herself to appear “all a-glow for the mo-

ment with the wild enthusiasm, the unreasoning faith, and the steady martyr-spirit” of her characters, ultimately concluding that Stowe’s “own religious feeling is a great artistic advantage to her”, not all of Stowe’s readers were equally enchanted by her second novel (Eliot 1856b, 571). By reading *Dred*, beside and through Stowe’s various writings on spiritualism, including her correspondence with Eliot, the eponymous hero who has been dismissed by nineteenth-century and recent critics as “a failed creation, a throwback to an Old Testament warrior-prophet who seems wildly misplaced in the novel”,<sup>8</sup> is recuperated as not only a potential model for Eliot’s own prophet Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* but also as a visionary character who represents the potential of spiritual communion to bridge racial, social, and perhaps even national boundaries.

Stowe’s highly detailed and extensive ‘research’ into the spiritual beliefs and capacities of African slaves makes *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is found Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* especially significant given the status of *Dred* as a mystical prophet. In 1854, two years after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and two years before the release of *Dred*, Stowe published the *Key*. As the lengthy subtitle implies, Stowe intended her ‘key’ to silence those critics who lambasted her first novel for featuring allegedly fabricated and hyperbolic scenes of slavery and also enlighten her readers as to the ‘real-life’ inspirations behind her now famous characters. Situated between two fictional renditions of the slave experience, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be read as a source text for the spiritualist elements in Stowe’s later novel *Dred*. According to Stowe,

[Africans] are possessed of a nervous organisation peculiarly susceptible and impressible. Their sensations and impressions are very vivid and their fancy and imagination lively [...]. Like Hebrews of old and the Oriental nations of the present, they give vent to their emotions with the utmost vivacity of expression, and their whole bodily system sympathises with the movements of their minds [...] Their religious exercises are all colored by this sensitive and exceedingly vivacious temperament. (45)

Stowe’s comparison of the African slave to the ancient Hebrew is intriguing due to both the common nineteenth century parallel between the exiled Jew and the African American slave as well as Eliot’s ‘translation’ of *Dred* into the story of contemporary British Jews in

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<sup>8</sup> See Mullany 2011 for a reading of the novel as a mystical as opposed to spiritualist novel.



*Daniel Deronda*. The connection between the “Hebrews of old” and the African is further elaborated when Stowe reflects upon the power of the Bible in the hands of the African slave. When discussing the impact of the scriptures on Dred as a young man she writes that “when this oriental seed, an exotic among us, is planted back into the fiery soil of a tropical heart, it bursts forth with an incalculable ardor of growth” (1854, 211). Here Stowe defamiliarises Christian understandings of the Bible, referring back to its “Hebraistic” origin and suggesting that perhaps, due to its birthplace’s proximity to Africa, the African subject is able to tap into a realm of religious experience that is not available to ‘us’ or what she presumes will be her primarily white audience.

Stowe’s reflection upon the “nervous organization” of the African is also particularly significant because its sentiments are repeated and depicted in the text of *Dred*. While *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* serves as an ‘encyclopedia’ of the African temperament, *Dred* provides concrete examples of these alleged tendencies and behaviours. When Nina Gordon, the white heroine and southern plantation owner, attends a camp meeting with her fiancé Clayton and various other slave-holding neighbours she is shocked by the behaviour of the slaves who gather on the edges of the meeting-ground. Nina witnesses a “circle of men and women [...] sitting with their eyes shut, and their heads thrown back, singing at the top of their voices. Occasionally, one or other would vary the exercises by clapping their hands, jumping up straight into the air, falling flat on the ground, screaming, dancing, and laughing” (244). In response to Nina’s dismay, Clayton explains:

We must have charity [...] for every religious manifestation. Barbarous and half-civilized people always find the necessity for outward and bodily demonstrations in worship; I suppose because the nervous excitement wakes up and animates their spiritual natures, and gets them into a receptive state [...] No, let the African scream, dance, and shout, and fall in trances. It suits his tropical lineage and blood. (245)

Clayton’s speech not only echoes Stowe’s claim concerning the “nervous constitution” of African slaves but also, in his reference to trances and “receptive state[s]”, evokes a popular nineteenth-century belief that African Americans were more susceptible to the power of mesmerists. As Stowe writes in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,

[m]esmerists have found that the negroes are singularly susceptible to all that class of influences which produce catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, and partial clairvoyant [*sic*] phenomena. (1854, 46)

Stowe connects this mesmeric potential to a long history of African involvement in magic and the supernatural arts:

The African race, in their own culture, are believers in spells, in “fetish and obi”, in “the evil eye”, and all other singular influences, for which probably there is an origin in this peculiarity of constitution. The magicians in scriptural history were Africans; and the so-called magical arts are still practised in Egypt, and other parts of Africa, with a degree of skill and success. (46)

Stowe’s attempt to link the mystical powers of African slaves to the prophets of the Bible, as well as her assertion that with such “peculiar constitutions” it is no wonder that the Christian religion can be such a “powerful stimulant” to the slave population, is fundamental to an understanding of *Dred*’s protagonist because he is neither fully a prophet nor completely an occult magician, but rather a hybrid of the two.

Both Stowe and Eliot employ spiritual realism in order to combine otherwise incompatible genres: the realist race novel and the supernatural tale. Just as spiritual realism allows both authors to create cohesive narratives, the spiritual and supernatural elements of their texts bring disparate characters together, creating a spiritual community in which race is no longer a divisive identity category. *Dred* first appears in the novel after eighteen chapters have passed, a delay that in many ways prefigures Eliot’s decentering narrative strategy of introducing Daniel in the first chapter of *Daniel Deronda* only to have him disappear from the plot and resurface in the sixteenth chapter. Prior to *Dred*’s appearance the novel’s plot revolves around the domestic drama of Nina Gordon and her slave Harry as they struggle to keep the family plantation Camena out of the hands of her drunken and dissolute elder brother Tom. *Dred* arrives in the novel at moments when interracial tension threatens to spill over into violence. He first materialises when Harry is walking back to his cottage after a confrontation with Tom regarding Tom’s desire to purchase Harry’s young wife Lisette. In the midst of Harry’s ruminations, *Dred* appears. Borrowing from popular nineteenth-century theories of phrenology, Stowe pays particular attention to the physiology of *Dred*’s skull:

[t]he perceptive organs jutted out like dark ridges over the eyes, while the part of the head which phrenologists attribute to moral and intellectual sentiments, rose like an ample dome above them. (198)

Beyond this phrenological reading of *Dred*’s appearance, Stowe hints at his prophetic abilities during her physiological survey of his features:

[T]here burned in [his eyes] like tongues of flame in a black pool of naphtha, a subtle and restless fire, that betokened habitual excitement to the verge of insanity. If any organs were predominant in the head, they were those of ideality, wonder, veneration, and firmness, and the whole combination was such as might have formed one of the wild warrior prophets of the heroic ages. (198)

Stowe simultaneously celebrates the animalistic force of Dred through her description of his physical prowess and underscores his intellectual, spiritual, and mystical abilities. While some scholars have criticised Stowe for such a seemingly ambivalent treatment of race, one that both emphasises the virility and the spiritual or mesmeric susceptibility of African slaves, Dred's status as a mystic and his tendency to fall into trances does not render him weak or effeminate, but rather connects him to a spiritualist tradition that transcends race as well as other earthly boundaries.

Existing in the space between insanity and divination, Dred is likened to the Biblical prophets and he has chosen a successor in Harry:

He had fixed his eye upon Harry, as a person whose ability, address, and strength of character, might make him at some day a leader in a conspiracy against the whites. (212)

Stowe reveals Dred's prophetic potential at the camp meeting, one of the novel's pivotal scenes. Under the cover of darkness, Dred bellows a prophecy of fire and brimstone to the terrified majority white audience in response to a slave-trade that was being conducted on the grounds of the revival between allegedly 'God-fearing' men. A performance that threatens racial unity with intimations of future violence, here the swamp prophet's psychological and spiritual liminality is further emphasised, and he is once more placed within a historical legacy of seers and oracles:

There is a twilight-ground between the boundaries of the sane and the insane, which the old Greeks and Romans regarded with a peculiar veneration. They held a person whose faculties were thus darkened as walking under the awful shadow of a supernatural presence; and, as the mysterious secrets of the stars only become visible in the night, so in these eclipses of the more material faculties they held there was often an awakening of supernatural perceptions. (273)

In the transitional state of dusk, Dred achieves his most powerful states of divination, as he crosses the boundary between the natural and spiritual realms in order to enter a state of "exaltation and trance" during which he predicts the threat that Tom Gordon poses

to Harry's wife. Adopting the rhetoric of the Hebrew Testament, Dred declares "in a hollow, altered voice, like that of a sleep-walker" that soon "shall the silver cord be loosed, and the golden bowl be broken. Yes, cover up the grave - cover it up! Now, hurry! come to me, or he will take thy wife for a prey!" (270). Unlike his more radical prophecy of bloodshed against slaveholders, Dred's vision regarding the safety of Lisette comes true and ultimately catalyses the creation of a multiracial spiritual community in the swamp. Drawn together by Dred's prophetic power, Harry and Lisette, as well as a Tiff, a loyal slave who takes it upon himself to raise his poor mistress' children after her death, retreat to the safety of the swamp. Even Nina's fiancé Clayton seeks asylum in Dred's community after he is run out of town by a lynch mob for espousing abolitionist views. Clayton is at first skeptical of Dred's preaching until gradually the prophet's "jargon of hebraistic [*sic*] phrases, names, and allusions" took on for him a "quaint and poetic interest" (509). Thus, Dred's camp becomes an even more intermediate space, one in which people of all races and social classes can reside in peace. Although this tranquillity is eventually destroyed when Dred is slain by Tom Gordon during a confrontation on the edge of the swamp, the camp itself is never tainted by violence and its inhabitants eventually flee the United States in order to avoid further conflict after the death of their leader.

Stowe's post-racial vision is clearly limited, since it is only by leaving the United States that the fugitive slaves and their former masters can live together in peace and this self-willed exile could be read as more conservative than progressive. However, instead of ending her text on a fearful and threatening note she suggests that Dred's revolutionary zeal has given birth to a concept of interracial communion that is ultimately more successful and productive than acts of insurrectionary violence. Stowe's decision to end her novel with Dred's death is more revolutionary than a climactic scene of interracial violence. After Dred's death, which echoes Uncle Tom's in its Christ imagery and sentimentality, his 'followers' travel North by means of the Underground Railroad. While some of the fugitives and poor whites establish themselves in various working-class positions in Northern cities, Clayton frees all of his slaves and takes them to Canada where he founds a settlement and school for free-blacks and fugitives. According to the narrator,

So high a character have [Clayton's] schools borne that the white settlers in the vicinity have discontinued their own, preferring to have their children enjoy the advantages of those under his and his sister's patronage and care. (544)

In a footnote added to the original edition, Stowe states that such facts "are all true of the Elgin settlement, founded by Mr. King, a

gentleman who removed and settled his slaves in the south of Canada" (544). Inspired by Dred's spiritual community in the liminal landscape of the Dismal Swamp, the ill-fated prophet's followers create an interracial community that defies the racial boundaries of the antebellum United States. Eliot takes up Stowe's vision in *Daniel Deronda* and complicates it by suggesting that spiritual communion has the potential to catalyze post-national identities.

#### 4 A "Sense of the Universal": Mesmeric Cosmopolitanism in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

In a letter dated March 18, 1876, Harriet Beecher Stowe provides a lengthy and somewhat critical review of her correspondent's most recent novel, *Daniel Deronda*. While she states that her husband Calvin was especially interested in the Jewish question, having "cultivated a personal relationship with the leading Rabbi" in their hometown of Mandarin, Florida and that some of his "spare learning [has rubbed] off onto [her]", Stowe admits that her "heart blood vibrates more toward Gwendolen than Mirah" (quoted in Springer 1986, 65), a reaction that was not peculiar to Stowe but was rather nearly universal among audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. While it is not surprising that Calvin would be drawn to Mordecai's Kabbalistic brand of Judaism given his status as an acknowledged spiritualist, Stowe's reaction is perhaps more startling due to the marked similarities between the plots, structures, and prophets of *Dred* and *Daniel Deronda*. Despite the fact that Stowe's second race novel clearly pushes the boundaries of realism through its emphasis on spiritual communion and mesmeric trances, what she most appreciates about Eliot's final novel is not its equally spiritual and iconoclastic moments, but rather what she deems as the 'domestic realism' of Gwendolen's character.

Stowe's preference for Gwendolen's plot over that of Daniel's due to the former's realism is particularly interesting when read in the context of Eliot's reviews of Stowe. In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", Eliot lauds Stowe as an exemplar of social realism, asking her British readership "[w]hy can we not have pictures of religious life among the industrial classes in England, as interesting as Mrs. Stowe's pictures of religious life among negroes" (1856, 252). Published in the same year in which *Dred* first appeared on the transatlantic literary circuit, Eliot's review implies that Stowe's depiction of the swamp prophet and his followers provides a truthful look into the spiritual lives of African slaves. In return for this praise, Stowe appears to dismiss any elements of *Daniel Deronda* that could render the text a work of social realism along the same lines of her own work, instead admiring Eliot's marriage plot. Stowe, like many readers of *Daniel Deronda*, appears to have been unable to reconcile what many critics

imagined as the 'two plots' of Eliot's final novel, a misreading that is particularly intriguing given the fact that Stowe's *Dred* was similarly criticised for having a fundamentally divided and ruptured plot.

Stowe's response to what has been erroneously labelled "the Jewish plot" of *Daniel Deronda* is even more surprising given Eliot's explicit emphasis on the racial element of her project in her letters. In a letter to Stowe, Eliot expounds on her intention to raise awareness of not only the mistreatment of Jews in contemporary British culture but also the inherent connection that exists between Judaism and Christianity. After castigating "the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews" Eliot writes:

I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us [...] But toward the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. (quoted in Cave 1995, xxii)

For Eliot, the most significant part of her project is not simply distinguishing the Jew as a figure who has been egregiously mistreated both historically and in British contemporary society, but rather to bridge the distance between the two religions in order to promote a concept of community, both local and global, that transcends the boundaries of racial and religious difference. Although many scholars have suggested that *Daniel Deronda* can be read as a gesture, however ambivalent or successful, toward a nascent notion of cosmopolitanism,<sup>9</sup> the focus of this study is not only that Eliot's text is coloured by a transatlantic and transnational element but also why and how she uses religious and spiritualist doctrine to create the possibility of such a boundary crossing community.

While Eliot initially appears to be focused on the transformative powers of Judaism in particular and not spirituality as such, Mordecai and Mirah's religious beliefs advocate a humanistic and universal connection that in many ways ignores strict dogmatic divisions, echoing and putting into practice Eliot's statement in her first letter to Stowe that

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<sup>9</sup> In "Unspeakable George Eliot" (2010), David Kurnick goes so far as to claim that Eliot is the Victorian writer who is most often labelled as a cosmopolitan writer. For cosmopolitan readings of *Daniel Deronda*, see Anderson 2001 and Tucker 2000.

a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot. (quoted in Springer 1986, 69)

This “more perfect” religion combines elements of nineteenth-century spiritualism, ancient mysticism, and the teachings of Kabbalah. According to Sarah Willburn, “[t]he complexity and heterodoxy of Eliot’s religious research and views” inherently reimagines the political or global message of her novel:

Judaism in this novel is unique because she imagines it is subsumed by a bigger category of Eastern pantheistic world religions, as opposed to solely imagining it within its own, traditional terms. (2006, 28)

By depicting Judaism as an ecumenical and universal system of spiritual belief, Eliot employs religious doctrine as a way to represent the need for community and interconnections between individuals and nations.

As is clear from Jane Irwin’s meticulously annotated edition of the *Daniel Deronda Notebooks*, Eliot immersed herself in the teaching and practices of not only traditional Judaism but also the more esoteric doctrine of Kabbalah while researching for her final novel. Solomon Maimon’s *Autobiography* (1792-1793), which is the very book that turns up in Mr. Ram’s second-hand bookshop in the novel, has multiple entries in Eliot’s journal, as well as Henry Hart Milman’s *The History of the Jews from the Earliest Period Down to Modern Times* (1866), another text that Daniel reads when he begins to explore Mirah and Mordecai’s heritage. In her notes on Graetz’s four volume study *History of the Jews* (1853-1870), Eliot pays particular attention to his discussion of the Kabbalistic doctrine of the transmigration of souls:

The doctrine of the Cabbala [sic] are neither ancient Jewish, nor new-philosophical. The ideal potencies, the spiritual intermediators between the Divine fullness of light & the dim world - the pre-existence of the soul - the transmigration of souls - the magical operation of human actions on the higher world - all belong to the Alexandrian neo-platonic philosophy. (1996, 175)

Here it is the immaterial materiality of the human soul, at once “magical” and divine and capable of catalysing real-world actions, that interests Eliot. The notebook entries dedicated to Maimon focus on “the twofold division of the Kabbalah into ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical,’ the latter being a mode of conjuring natural forces” (Irwin in Eliot 1996,

172). According to Irwin, Eliot's project becomes fitting "the theory or fable of Kabbalistic doctrine into the practical, naturalistic, world of her narrative" (172). Eliot fulfils this project through her depiction of the modern Jewish prophet Mordecai.

Daniel first encounters Mordecai when he wanders into the "Judengasse" of London in search of Mirah's family. Upon entering a book stall next to Ezra Cohen's pawn shop, Daniel sees Mordecai and is struck by his unusual appearance, thinking that he had "precisely such a physiognomy as that might possibly have been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the medieval time" (386). The prophetic and visionary status of Mordecai is only further highlighted by Eliot's digression on the multiple definitions of "second sight" at the beginning of the thirty-eighth chapter, the chapter in which she relates Mordecai's history and spiritualist visions. Before narrating Mordecai's dedicated search for the fulfilment of his prophecies, Eliot discusses the nature of clairvoyance:

'Second sight' is a flag over disputed ground. But it is a matter of knowledge that there are persons whose yearnings, conceptions - nay, travelled conclusions - continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power: the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type; the event they hunger for or dread rises into vision with a seed-like growth, feeding itself fast on unnumbered impressions. (471)

In a similar fashion to the way in which she plays with the ambiguity of heightened consciousness in her private writings, Eliot utilises the instability of "second sight" in both this passage and throughout the text. Over the course of the novel multiple characters are said to have "second sight", including Gwendolen, Lush, and Daniel, however no character exhibits the supernatural and visionary meaning of the term in the way that Mordecai does.

Perhaps the most explicit evidence of Mordecai's prophetic powers occurs in the scene in which he meets Daniel on the Kew bridge over the Thames. It is not a coincidence that Daniel encounters Mirah for the first time while rowing on the Thames and also sees Mordecai while on the river. According to E.S. Shaffer, water plays an important role in the doctrine of Kabbalah:

The mystical transference of the name of God from master to disciple [...] traditionally took place over water [...] and achieves a portion of the restoration of unity to the severed parts of mankind through the special relationship of certain souls. (1975, 256)

Kabbalah's emphasis on "the restoration of the spiritual structure of mankind" and the interconnectedness of souls is emphasised in the



geography of the scene; Mordecai stands on a bridge, a structure that unites and connects divided banks of land. The bridge is also a liminal space; it is neither water nor land but a hybrid or intermediate space and thus an appropriate setting for this moment of spiritual revelation and connection. As Daniel ties his boat to the dock, his eyes meet Mordecai's, gazing out from a figure that is

brought out by the western light into startling distinctness and brilliancy - an illuminated type of bodily emaciation and spiritual eagerness. (1996, 493)

Once contact has been made, Eliot shifts perspective from Daniel's to Mordecai's in order to depict the ailing prophet's eagerness as his vision comes to fruition. Mordecai watches Daniel's progress up the river with

a recovery of impressions that made him quiver as with a presentiment, till at last the nearing figure lifted up its face towards him - the face of his visions. (493)

When the two are finally face to face, Mordecai declares "I expected you to come down the river. I have been waiting for you these five years" (493). After this prophecy-fulfilling meeting on the bridge, Mordecai reveals his spiritual mission to Daniel, as well as his need for Daniel to continue that mission after his death. Mordecai's mission is not strictly concerned with the transmission of Judaism as a biological, cultural, and religious inheritance, but rather his yearning for Daniel ties into a notion of spiritual transmission and its relation to nation-formation and national identity. Mordecai is not only concerned about the replenishment of the Jews, but rather of a world community that can be mobilised through such spiritual communication. As Avron Fleishman argues, Mordecai

is closer to being the spokesman of a religion of humanity, Jewish division, than he is of being either representative of the age-old Jewish anticipations of messianic restoration or a predecessor of the political Zionism that emerged later in the century. (2010, 204)

Not only is Mordecai's version of Kabbalah more invested in the potential for universal communion through the transmigration of souls than the more specific need to preserve and transmit Jewish doctrine to future generations, but his discussions of transmigration often look outward to a transnational notion of community. When reflecting on the various spiritual connections that exist between men, Mordecai states:

“Man finds his pathways: at first they were foot-tracks, as those of the beasts in the wilderness; now they are swift and invisible: his thought dives through the ocean, and his wishes thread the air: has he found all the pathways yet? What reaches him, stays with him, rules him, he must accept it, not knowing its pathway”. (1996, 503)

Here Mordecai refers not only to the “swift and invisible” pathways of the telegraphic cable that “dives through the ocean” to make transatlantic communication possible, but also to the equally invisible spiritual and mesmeric circuits that link humanity. This understanding of global spiritual transmission is only further developed when Mordecai takes Daniel to the Philosopher’s Club where he engages in a debate over proto-Zionist theories. Instead of arguing for the need of a distinct and separate Jewish state, Mordecai once more stresses the interconnectedness of all races, religions, and nations. According to Mordecai,

[t]he life of a people grows, it is knit together and yet expanded, in joy and sorrow, in thought and action; it absorbs the thoughts of other nations into its own forms, and gives back the thought as new wealth to the world; it is a power and an organ in the great body of nations. (526)

For Mordecai, the Jewish people are simply one part of a greater world community and it is his desire that his race “may be, as of old, a medium of transmission and understanding” to all nations (532). Thus, Mordecai’s spiritual transmission to Daniel at the end of the novel enacts on an individual scale what he hopes will one day occur globally.

Eliot’s spiritual realism not only serves to connect Mordecai and Daniel but also allows for a reading of the novel as one cohesive narrative. Just as spiritual realism links individual characters, in particular Daniel and Gwendolen through their almost psychic connection, the genre also links what has often been labelled a bifurcated plot. Thus, there is no longer the ‘English plot’ and ‘Jewish plot’ but rather a single plot that advocates for the creation of a more inclusive transnational community. Even in what has erroneously been named ‘Gwendolen’s plot’ by both nineteenth century and modern readers, there is an underlying emphasis on the need to look beyond one’s own experience to the global sphere. In several passages Eliot’s narrator seems to chastise Gwendolen and her neighbours in rural England for their limited vision of the world.

The connection between a global worldview and spirituality is made explicit in several conversations between Daniel and Gwendolen. Influenced by his interactions with Mordecai and Mirah, Dan-

iel is no longer as mesmerised by the figure of Gwendolen but rather takes on the role of a spiritual advisor to the novel's heroine. When Gwendolen desperately asks him how she can improve herself and be a better person, Daniel responds

Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. Try to care for what is best in thought and action - something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot. (446)

Gwendolen responds to this advice physically as if "an electric shock" has been sent through her body, a reaction that further links such outward and global thinking to mesmeric and spiritual connections. This connection is perhaps most evident in one of the final scenes of the novel when Daniel tells Gwendolen of his impending marriage to Mirah and his plans to travel to Israel. After Daniel tells Gwendolen of his plans, there is a charged silence between the two:

There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind...enter like an earthquake into their own lives - when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war [...] Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot, and riding on the wings of the wind, till mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling fiery visitation. (803)

Here Eliot weaves together the central themes of her final novel. To show that Gwendolen's "soul" has finally been freed from its imprisonment in the limited circle of her life experience and given a glimpse of the wide world around her, Eliot links images of the American Civil War and global consciousness with "the Invisible Power" of the universal spirituality that Mordecai preached during his life. In one of the most pivotal scenes of the novel, one that has often been read as a scene of thwarted romance and separation, Eliot turns her reader's attention away from the particular situation of her hero and heroine to the universal spirituality that has the potential to create and invigorate a global community.

## 5 “[A] Yearning Disembodied Spirit, Stirred with a Vague Social Passion”: Literary, Spiritual, and Racial Communion

In the epigraph to the chapter in which Gwendolen and Daniel finally see each other again after their first mesmeric meeting at the casino in Leubronn, Eliot uses an excerpt from Walt Whitman’s poem “Vocalism”, a piece that celebrates the power of the human voice to captivate its listener:

Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice,  
him or her I shall follow,  
As the water follows the moon, silently,  
with fluid steps anywhere around the globe.

While the two lines chosen by Eliot prefigure Gwendolen’s reflection upon the “coercion” that Daniel had “exercised over her thought” since their first encounter and anticipates the “future influence” that his presence, both physical and epistolary, will have on her life, this excerpt also suggests the notion of global communion. “Silent” and with “fluid steps” the poetic speaker dissolves into near immateriality in order to follow the equally immaterial call of “the right voice”. In the lines preceding these, the speaker asks “Do you move in these broad lands as broad as they? | Come duly to the divine power to speak words” (3-4). Traversing earthly boundaries, the “voice” is endowed with a spiritual power that leads the listener to follow. Like the prophets Mordecai and Dred, the voice of Whitman’s poem has “the quality to strike and to | uncloseth” (20), breaking down barriers and seeking new forms of communication.

While this poem emphasises the power of the spoken word, I argue that these sentiments can easily be extended to the power of the printed word. Just like the voice celebrated by Whitman, the letters between Gwendolen and Daniel, Nina and Clayton, and, by extension, between Eliot and Stowe, literally cross national and geographic boundaries to reach their intended audience. Once they are received, they wield a similarly transformative force, establishing spiritual, transnational, and transracial communions between distant readers. The final line of Whitman’s verse suggests that this prophetic voice is not only needed for such new formulations of community to be possible but also to rouse the spirits of the dead: “Until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies | slumbering forever ready in words” (21-2). It is through words, whether written or spoken, that true spiritual power rests.

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