

Five Choices of Parentage, Identity, and Nation in George Eliot's Adoption Novels

When I was in my late twenties, my adoptive mother and I were discussing my then unknown birth mother, and she said something like, "She couldn't marry him because he was Jewish."

"What?" I exclaimed. This was a new element in the story.

"No, I was thinking about someone else," she took back the revelation. But within a few days she decided that I was old enough to handle the truth and acknowledged that my birth father was indeed Jewish.

Well! I was a committed, if left-wing, Catholic, but . . .

I went to a Holy Day service at the University's Hillel that year, and I started to research Jewish history to revise my dissertation chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* for publication. Some time after I met my birth mother, and shortly after the television miniseries on the Holocaust, I wrote my second letter to my birth father, and he responded with the article about himself I described earlier in this book. And no accompanying message except what was implied.

I have written him several times since then, never receiving a letter or even another newspaper article. Before my daughter was born, I wrote him yet again, asking about hereditary diseases. No word. More recently, I tried the approach of writing without mentioning my relationship to him, presenting myself as a researcher on immigrant Jews in Brooklyn. No answer from him, but a phone call from his wife, who left a message with my husband wanting to know how I got his name. I called, got the answering machine, left a message with my phone number, and eventually he called back. He didn't recognize my name. "You sent me an article about yourself a long time ago," I said.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, and hung up.

In the early 1980s, I read *Daniel Deronda* for the first time. This, I felt, was *my book!* I had never before read any novel that discussed in such detail an adoptee's curiosity about ancestry, discovery that that ancestry was Jewish, nor finding a biological parent only to learn that a relationship with that parent was impossible.

But if the book was fascinating, it was also challenging. Personally, it was challenging because, in spite of the similarity in our stories, I could not follow Daniel into Judaism, and I wanted to understand why. Intellectually, *Daniel Deronda* was challenging because its plot is so different from the plots of Eliot's two other novels in which an adoptee must choose between biological and adoptive ancestry. Their adoptees make decisions opposite to Daniel's. In *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*, Eliot redefines parenthood to emphasize nurturance rather than genetics; in *Daniel Deronda* genetic parenthood is presented as "the real thing," and, reinforcing the picture of adoption as falsehood, Daniel's adoptive father seems to think more about how Daniel helps his image than about Daniel's feelings. In all three works, the adoptee's climactic choice is presented as the inevitable result of previous events in the novel, and the right thing to do. Though *Deronda* is especially interesting because of its detailed treatment of an adoptee's subjectivity, hidden Jewishness, and abortive reunion, this chapter will place it in the context of Eliot's whole career and in particular of her other fictions of adoption.

While adoption has been a common event in the English novel, George Eliot is the only well-known novelist who repeatedly structures her books to lead up to an adoptee's choice of heritage. Her one poetic drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*, written close in time to *Deronda*, has a similar structure—the main character changes her life when she discovers that her birth father is a Gypsy. And adoption also figures importantly in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Romola*.

Why was Eliot so interested in adoption? Why do *Silas Marner*'s Eppie and *Felix Holt*'s Esther choose their adoptive parents over their biological parents, while the adoptees in her last two works of fiction choose to identify with their heredity? What has been the effect of her fictions of adoption? Eliot's representations of adoption and adoptees are plot devices, and as Bernard Semmel points out in *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, are ways of dealing with the nation's cultural past and recent social change.¹ While these contexts

are important, I will analyze the novels in relation to adoption and not simply take their adoptions as allegories of other issues.

As the previous chapter has shown, many other British nineteenth-century novelists use adoption plots for psychological and social exploration: to dramatize struggles against stigma, to show class differences, and to emphasize the unexpected connections of widely separated characters. The number of adoptions in nineteenth-century novels is particularly striking because the institution was not legally formalized at that time. Figures on the frequency of informal adoptions are impossible to obtain (partly because of the difficulty of determining what counts as adoption, if it is informal), and historians differ significantly in their guesses.²

Neither George Eliot nor any other major novelist who dealt with this issue was adopted in any of the usual senses. Nor were most of their readers. We are dealing to a large extent with adoption as the precondition for the family romance plot, adoption in its mythic dimension—the fantasy that people develop to deal with uncongenial parents by imagining better parents elsewhere. It is indeed as this fantasy—related to Eliot’s experience of alienation in her own family of origin—that adoption enters into her most directly autobiographical novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie imagines the Gypsies as her “unknown kindred.”³

Literal adoption occurred in Eliot’s own circle and also, from a very early point, interested her in her reading. Her friend Charles Bray, who influenced her young adulthood enormously, adopted his own out-of-wedlock child, Nelly, with his wife Cara’s consent, as Godfrey, in *Silas Marner*, might have done had he been willing to confess to Nancy.⁴ Eliot—as I will call her for convenience, although she did not use this pseudonym until later—speaks about this child in a May 1845 letter and, later, sympathizes with Cara Bray on Nelly’s death at nineteen: “There is no such thing as consolation, when we have made the lot of another our own as you did Nelly’s.”⁵ While working on *Middlemarch* much later, Eliot came across a story somewhat similar to this one in Plutarch’s *On the Virtues of Women* and recorded it in her notebook: “Stratonica, wife of Degetanus, being barren persuaded him to take another woman, & educated their children tenderly & magnificently.”⁶ During her preparatory reading for *Middlemarch*, she also took note of one of the classic analyses of adoption as a fiction, in Henry J. S.

Maine's *Ancient Law*. This book is distinctive for the view that "without the Fiction of Adoption which permits the family tie to be artificially created, it is difficult to understand how society would ever have escaped from its swaddling clothes and taken its first steps toward civilization."⁷ She summarizes from Maine, "Kinship conceived as the sole ground of community in political functions (The substitution of *local contiguity* a startling revolution). Hence adoption & the fiction of a common progenitor."⁸

The most immediate variety of adoption in George Eliot's milieu, however, was her own relationship to G. H. Lewes's sons. In 1859, when she and Lewes made a mutual commitment that would have been marriage except for the peculiarities of Victorian restrictions on divorce, Lewes's oldest son, Charles, then sixteen, wrote her a letter addressing her as "Mother."⁹ Eliot was forty, the same age Silas Marner is when little Eppie wanders into his home. Her commitment was so great that when Charles came to live with them, she and Lewes moved to a home in town, although she preferred the country, because Charles needed to live near his work. These biographical details are surely among the reasons why *Silas Marner*, as Eliot put it, "thrust itself" on her to interrupt her work on *Romola* (GEL 3:360). She was thinking about child rearing, and in particular about the rearing of a child not born to her. Rosemarie Bodenheimer traces in detail George Eliot's relation to her three stepsons, and notes that "her focus on children brought up by substitute parents, and her privileging of fostering over kinship, was a dominant feature of her imagination from 1860 to the end of her career; the experience of her stepsons gave her the authority for those imagined lives."¹⁰

I want to extend Bodenheimer's convincing analysis here. If not yet a dominant feature of her imagination, adoption was of interest to Eliot even before 1860; the unfortunate heroine of "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," the second story she published (in 1857), is a poor Italian girl adopted by an English aristocrat. This apparently is a transformation of the story of a collier's daughter educated as a singer by Lady Newdigate, of the family for whom Eliot's father had worked (GEL 3:211). Even earlier, in 1855, she took notes on a story in which "a man of wealth in Rome adopted a poor boy he had found in the street" who turned out to be a great villain.¹¹ Her prospective role as stepmother to Lewes's sons may have already been on her mind; both of these plots suggest

fear that adoption could be disastrous. But in 1860, when two of the boys have actually lived with her and Lewes in London, she feels impelled to write *Silas Marner*, her most positive picture of adoption. As Bodenheimer also notes, adoption takes on an importance in Eliot's fiction that goes far beyond her reflections on her step-parenthood. She analyzes adoptions across class, race, nation, and culture, and contrasts nurturing and self-centered parental relationships. In the way that adoption dramatizes the need to deal with other people's differences from oneself, it becomes a paradigmatic test for her central concern with sympathy.¹²

Silas Marner rewrites the plot of many novels and plays in which a character is reunited with biological parents and returns to them. Godfrey Cass refuses to acknowledge Molly, the wife he has secretly married. When she dies, their daughter Eppie wanders into the home of the poor, isolated weaver Silas. Silas raises her with much love; she flourishes, and through his concern for Eppie, Silas develops ties with other people. After many years, childless by his acknowledged wife, Nancy, Godfrey reveals himself to Silas and Eppie as her father, and asks her to return to him. He says, "I have a natural claim on her that must stand before every other" (169). But Eppie does not agree.¹³ In *Silas Marner*, adoptive parenthood is the crucial parenthood.

In one sense, the novel is a dramatized child custody case. But instead of the legal system, Eppie herself—and the readers—must decide which family she should choose. How does her rejection of heredity in favor of nurture become the right and inevitable choice in a novel full of descriptions and imagery of natural growth?

At stake is the meaning of two key words, *father* and *nature*. Both represent important concerns for Eliot. She had written about a compelling father-daughter relationship in *The Mill on the Floss*, was working on one in *Romola*, and was much interested in the approach to nature in the science of her day as well as aesthetically. As *father*, *nature*, and their variants sound repeatedly in the dialogue and narration, child rearing comes to define both. The novel challenges the opposition between adoption and nature and presents adoptive relationships as natural in themselves. Indeed, in a letter to her publisher as she is completing *Silas*, Eliot describes as its intended emphasis "the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations" (GEL 3:382). Perhaps partly to help engage a reader more skeptical about adoption, she

grounds Silas's first association for Eppie—after he discovers that she is not a heap of gold but a golden-haired child—in the memory of his long-dead little sister, after whom he names her.

Long before the novel explicitly engages with prejudices against adoption, its language, like the plot, encourages the reader to see parenthood as not only genetic and the nurture of adoption as natural. Dolly, the book's authority on child rearing, says to Silas, "You'll have a right to her if you're a father to her, and bring her up according" (123). She predicts that with Silas, "The child 'ull grow like grass i' May" (121). Silas's raising Eppie is compared to the way "some man who has a precious plant to which he would give a nurturing home in a new soil, thinks of the rain and sunshine, and all influences, in relation to his nursling, and asks industriously for all knowledge that will help him to satisfy the wants of the searching roots" (131). He acts like a parental bird: "the stone hut was made a soft nest for her, lined with downy patience" (129). Silas goes out to the meadows with Eppie, she plucks flowers, they listen for birds: nurturing his adoptee, Silas puts them both in close contact with nature. Eppie at sixteen is "the freshest blossom of youth" (138) with a suitor who woos her partly by promising to bring her flowers from the gardens where he works. They will be doing more transplanting and nurturing, as metaphorically Silas did.¹⁴

In the crucial confrontation scene, from Nancy's point of view Godfrey is the "real father" and "father by blood" (171) and Silas is "foster-father" (171); she thinks "there's a duty you owe to your lawful father" (173). On the other hand, from Eppie's point of view, Silas is the "long-loved father" and Godfrey is the "unfamiliar father" (note the pun on *family* in "unfamiliar") (171). Pointing up the irony in the term "real," Eppie thinks of Silas as "a father very close to her, who loved her better than any real fathers in the village seemed to love their daughters" (147). As Silas says to Godfrey, "It's me she's been calling her father ever since she could say the word" (170).

Though Godfrey maintains, "I have a natural claim on her that must stand before every other" (169), the novel contests this argument. And when he gives up that claim, it is with an image of an accomplished natural process: "While I've been putting off and putting off, the trees have been growing—it's too late now" (174).

In addition to presenting Eppie's relationship with Silas as natural, the novel also tries to support it by treating the Raveloe community's valorization of heredity and its dominant ideas of what is natural criti-

cally. In a comic exaggeration of restrictive views, the town of Raveloe welcomes Doctor Kimble “as a doctor by hereditary right,” a response accompanied by the belief that “Kimble was inherently a doctor’s name.” Since he has no son, the practice may “one day be handed over to a successor, with the incongruous name of Taylor or Johnson. But in that case the wiser people in Raveloe would employ Dr. Blick of Flitton—as less unnatural” (98).

More centrally, in Nancy’s early refusal to adopt Eppie, whose heredity she does not know, the novel engages explicitly with prejudices against adoption. Nancy believes that “to adopt a child, because children of your own had been denied you, was to try and choose your lot in spite of Providence; the adopted child, she was convinced, would never turn out well, and would be a curse to those who had wilfully and rebelliously sought what it was clear that, for some high reason, they were better without” (156). She recalls an acquaintance’s story about an adopted “child” who became a criminal: “That was the only adopting I ever heard of: and the child was transported [to Australia, for punishment] when it was twenty-three” (157). Notice her reference to the twenty-three-year-old as a child, and with the pronoun “it”—generally not used of human beings, at least not of human beings past early childhood.¹⁵

Eliot encourages the reader to criticize Nancy’s bias against adoption, associating it with the past: “Adoption was more remote from the ideas and habits of that time than of our own” (155–56). She links it with other examples of Nancy’s “unalterable little code. . . she insisted on dressing like Priscilla, because ‘it was right for sisters to dress alike’” (156). Then she suggests that Nancy’s thinking is “nearly akin to that of many devout people, whose beliefs are held in the shape of a system quite remote from her knowledge” (157). Prejudice against adoption is thus associated with system. The paragraph ends by commenting that “human beliefs, like all natural growths, elude the barriers of system,” which suggests that a too rigid system like Nancy’s or that of the more educated “devout people” is unnatural. Furthermore, Eliot criticizes Nancy’s prejudices by the implied contrast between the admirable Eppie and the transported twenty-three-year-old, as well as by the sadness and guilt that both Nancy and Godfrey feel when Nancy finds out the truth about Eppie, and Godfrey realizes that Nancy might have been willing to adopt her if she had known of his parenthood earlier.

Although this is a novel that favors adoption, it does show some

effects of heredity on Eppie. Eppie's hair and eyes are like Godfrey's, so much so that Molly plans to use this resemblance as proof of their relationship. We are told that, as Eppie grows up, she "cannot help being rather vexed about her hair, for there is no other girl in Raveloe who has hair at all like it, and she thinks hair ought to be smooth" (138). What she sees as unruliness is also associated with nature: "the hair ripples as obstinately as a brooklet under the March breeze." With Eppie's limited perception, she does not understand that her curly auburn hair would, by many people, be regarded as more beautiful; in this detail the novel includes a remnant of the traditional romance of separated family members, which emphasizes their physical similarity by contrast to others—even perhaps a trace of the ugly duckling story, in which the cygnet must find the swans to avoid being judged by ducks' standards. However, throughout the novel, among the many characters who have some acquaintance with both Eppie and Godfrey, no one but Molly, in this heredity-conscious town of Raveloe, perceives their resemblance until the very end. Only after Eppie has rejected them does Nancy observe to Godfrey that she has "just your hair and eyes: I wondered it had never struck me before." The great social gap between the two figures has prevented anyone not already aware from thinking about whether the two auburn heads might have some connection.

To add to that social gap, there was available in Eliot's England a view of national composition that would make Silas's adoption of Eppie virtually a transracial adoption. Scott and Disraeli had emphasized the differing heritage of the Saxons and the Normans in the making of England in a way that encouraged nineteenth-century England to regard the poor as descendants of the Saxons and the rich as descendants of the Normans.¹⁶ Disraeli's *Sybil* had as its subtitle *The Two Nations*, which referred to the rich and the poor, between whom, he wrote, "there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws."¹⁷ Eppie's transfer from Godfrey's world to Silas's has been so complete that no one imagines she might have been part of Godfrey's world. While the novel refuses the apparent reconciliation of the classes that her return to Godfrey would suggest—in the traditional romance plot—it is partly to

point out that rich and poor, Godfrey and Eppie, are already bound in important but unrecognized ways.

However, in *Silas Marner* the bond of child-father kinship is most importantly a matter of responsible action—or, as Susan R. Cohen writes, “creative human affection”—more than of biology.¹⁸ Even Nancy, in spite of her prejudice against adoption, eventually concedes, “It’s natural you should cling to those who’ve brought you up” (173). She then falls back on duty to define Godfrey’s tie to Eppie, but his own behavior has discredited this appeal. While Eliot uses the tradition of showing the adopted child as different from the other children in her environment, she makes a point of attributing as much of the difference here to Silas’s loving care of Eppie as to her upper-class heredity. “The tender and peculiar love with which Silas had reared her in almost inseparable companionship with himself, aided by the seclusion of their dwelling, had prevented her from the lowering influences of the village talk and habits” (146). While Eppie’s “delicate prettiness” must to some extent come from her heredity, Eliot emphasizes the influence of Silas’s “perfect love” and its “breath of poetry” on her “refinement and fervour.” Nevertheless, Eppie presents her choice of Silas not just as a choice of an individual family, but also as a choice of class: “I wasn’t brought up to be a lady, and I can’t turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their houses, and their ways. And . . . I’m promised to marry a working-man” (173). (No one mentions the fact that her choice of life is also closer to her mother’s class, and her mother’s influence on her heredity is never discussed.)

As Rosemarie Bodenheimer has noted, Silas’s rearing of Eppie is idealized in many ways that can be seen as transmutations of Eliot’s own experience as a stepmother—and many of our own experiences of child rearing. There is no problem when Eppie interrupts Silas’s work; there is no problem when Silas doesn’t discipline Eppie. The novel is in many ways a fantasy, and a fantasy particularly appealing to someone who values nonbiological parenting. The transfer of Eppie from her mother to Silas is, as Bodenheimer writes, “performed when both adults are unconscious,” thus eliminating conflict. Furthermore, both biological parents are, in different ways, clearly unworthy, and out of the picture for most of the novel.¹⁹ Silas is completely open with Eppie about her history: “It would have been impossible for him to hide from Eppie that she was not his own child” (146). Though he is modest here in his claim

on her, she thinks hardly at all about any other father; she wants to know more about her mother, but does not know enough to worry about her mother's addiction to drink or opium, and what of this she might have inherited. It is, however, very important that the parents were married—her mother's wedding ring is very precious to her. The ring is necessary to the plot because Godfrey's relationship to her mother must be serious enough to be an obstacle to the higher-status marriage he wants, but it also saves Eppie from stigma.

Molly Farren, Eppie's mother, is almost as absent from the novel as she can possibly be. There is no suggestion that Eppie has inherited anything from her. Godfrey's secret marriage to her is described as the consequence of "a movement of compunction . . . on a pliant nature . . . an ugly story of low passion, delusion, and waking from delusion" (30). Eliot devotes two pages of chapter 12 to Molly's point of view, which is no prettier. As she walks through the snow to confront the Cass family, "Molly knew that the cause of her dingy rags was not her husband's neglect, but the demon Opium to whom she was enslaved, body and soul" (107). As Nancy Paxton observes, Eliot is emphasizing the idea that maternal altruism must be cultivated; it is not an automatic instinct that always prevails.²⁰ Molly does have good impulses: the sentence quoted above, for example, continues, "except in the lingering mother's tenderness that refused to give him her hungry child."²¹ Cold and tired, Molly thinks of getting comfort from "the familiar demon in her bosom; but . . . the mother's love pleaded for painful consciousness rather than oblivion—pleaded to be left in aching weariness, rather than to have the encircling arms benumbed so that they could not feel the dear burden" (108). But the negative picture of Molly dominates: in effect the birth mother is being sacrificed to save the reader's sympathies—to some small extent for Godfrey, and much more for Silas. Eliot even goes so far as to associate the beginning of Eppie's exalted basking in love and poetry with the moment she leaves her dead mother, before she actually meets Silas: "this breath of poetry had surrounded Eppie from the time when she had followed the bright gleam that beckoned her to Silas's hearth" (146). Considering how often *Silas Marner* has been required school reading, how many adoptees have formed pictures of their birth mother based on it? How many birth mothers who came back to school with the assurance that no one would ever know where they had been, could tell no one why they hated this book?

The family romance, discussed by Freud, analyzed by Frye and oth-

ers, and repeated in many tales, novels, and plays, including *The Winter's Tale*, casts the birth parents as rich nobility and the adoptive parents as poor commoners.²² In real life, the situation is more likely to be the opposite. Molly's poverty is the detail of this novel that resonates most with the actual circumstances of most historical and recent birth mothers.

How does ideology of class register in the novel? In the insistence that even Molly knew that Godfrey is not really the cause of her problems, the novel is class-biased and conservative. Nevertheless, in other ways the novel uses the adoption plot to protest against the split between classes. This protest is made very subtly. No one thinks about the similarity between Godfrey's and Eppie's hair, in spite of the fact that they live fairly close together (Godfrey eventually becomes Silas's landlord).²³ However, Aaron, the gardener Eppie marries, does, once, make the protest more explicitly. Discussing the excess of flowers owned by the Casses, he says "there's never a garden in all the parish but what there's endless waste in it for want o' somebody as could use everything up. . . . there need nobody run short o' victuals if the land was made the most on" (140).

Near the end of *Silas Marner*, Aaron transplants the superfluous flowers to make a garden for Eppie, where she can nurture them as Silas nurtured her after her own transplant. Just as Eliot rewrites Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* in making Eppie choose her adoptive father, she rewrites the passage in *The Winter's Tale* in which the unknowing adoptee Perdita rejects grafted flowers; instead the novel supports the argument of Perdita's interlocutor Polixenes, which Eliot quotes elsewhere: "This is an art / Which does mend nature, change it rather, but / The art itself is nature."²⁴

Romola, on which Eliot was already working when she began *Silas Marner*, presents a very different picture of the results of adoption. Romola's husband Tito had been, as a little boy, "rescued . . . from a life of beggary, filth, and cruel wrong, [and] . . . reared . . . tenderly," by Baldassare, whom Tito, as an adult, refuses to ransom from slavery.²⁵ When Baldassare is freed, he pursues the ambitious Tito for vengeance and, like the adoptive father in Eliot's notebook, kills him. But as if Eliot needed to place a positive picture of adoption next to the picture of an unsuccessful one, right after Tito's death Romola rescues a Jewish child whose family has died of the plague, cares for him while she serves

the plague-stricken village, leaves him with another adoptive mother there, and seeks out Tessa, who has had two children by Tito believing that they were married, so that she can help Tessa raise those children. This is all narrated in a few idealizing pages—the Jewish child is baptized Benedetto (blessed) without any thought of a problem in changing his religion, and Mamma Romola, as he calls her, tells Tessa's little Lillo of the baseness of “a man to whom I was once very near” (675), without the hint that she is one day to tell him that this was his father.

In *Felix Holt*, her next novel, Eliot once again explores a father-daughter adoption, with many similarities to the one in *Silas Marner*, but in a more realistic tone and with a more extended look at the class and national issues that discovering heredity can involve. Esther's original father, Bycliffe, an aristocratic English prisoner of war, dies without ever seeing her. Her mother, Annette, a Frenchwoman who goes to England to seek him out, finds refuge in her hunger and poverty with a poor Dissenting minister, Rufus. French and Catholic, she seems blind to Rufus, but he loves her silently with the passion of a delayed first love, and provides for her and little Esther, to the shock of his parishioners. Passively she accepts his love and agrees to marry him, and when she dies four years later, Esther becomes his responsibility.

As in *Silas Marner*, Eliot suggests a class contrast between adopted daughter and father; we first see Esther through the eyes of Felix, whose quest to bring about political reform by educating workers is a central concern of the novel, and who eventually provides some moral education for Esther: “a very delicate scent, the faint suggestion of a garden, was wafted as she went. . . . he had a sense of an elastic walk, the tread of small feet, a long neck and a high crown of shining brown plaits with curls that floated backward—things, in short, that suggested a fine lady to him.”²⁶ Because she speaks some French from her early life with her mother, Rufus has sent her to school in France, to prepare her to support herself by language teaching. But he does not anticipate how her governess position will affect her. Unlike Eppie, Esther experiences several conflicting kinds of environment: after her time with Rufus, “all her native tendencies towards luxury, fastidiousness, and scorn of mock gentility, were strengthened by witnessing the habits of a well-born and wealthy family” (159). While *Silas Marner* emphasizes the idealization that Silas's love of Eppie brings, *Felix Holt* presents the love of a poor adoptive father from the viewpoint of a daughter raised in a more pre-

tentious environment. The novel vividly portrays her ambivalence about Rufus: “Esther had affection for her father: she recognised the purity of his character, and a quickness of intellect in him which responded to her own liveliness, in spite of what seemed a dreary piety, which selected everything that was least interesting and romantic in life and history. But his old clothes had a smoky odour” (161). Extending this ambivalence, through most of the book Esther is troubled by self-division: “Her life was a heap of fragments, and so were her thoughts” (264).

Rufus is less idealized than Silas not only from his daughter’s point of view but also from other perspectives; he refuses to give Esther more than a sentence of information about her mother, because “He had not the courage to tell Esther that he was not really her father: he had not the courage to renounce that hold on her tenderness which the belief in his natural fatherhood must help to give him, or to incur any resentment that her quick spirit might feel at having been brought up under a false supposition” (162).

Thus, though memories of her mother are more vivid than Eppie’s, they are not vivid enough: “she had no more than a broken vision of the time before she was five years old . . . when a very small white hand, different from any that came after, used to pat her, and stroke her. . . and when at last there was nothing but sitting with a doll on a bed where mamma was lying, till her father once carried her away” (161).

The psychological question of which way Esther’s attitude to Rufus is going to turn is closely connected with the plot question of what she will find out about her heredity; these questions fuse when Esther learns that she is heir to the Transome estate and must decide whether to accept it.

When Rufus learns that Esther might profit “if the law knew who was her father” (350), he tells her the next day. This openness transforms their relationship:

her mind seemed suddenly enlarged by a vision of passion and struggle, of delight and renunciation, in the lot of beings who had hitherto been a dull enigma to her. And in the act of unfolding to her that he was not her real father, but had only striven to cherish her as a father, had only longed to be loved as a father, the odd, wayworn, unworldly man became the object of a new sympathy in which Esther felt herself exalted. (354)

As in *Silas Marner*, the language plays with the question of who should be called father. The characters are introduced in chapter 5 simply as father and daughter; but the passage about Rufus's failure to tell the story describes him as "not really her father." When Christian, her dead birth father's acquaintance, discusses Esther with Rufus, he makes a point of calling her Rufus's "daughter, step-daughter, I should say" (351). But Rufus's answer to him refers to "my daughter's birth," and Christian follows him in saying, "It is for your daughter's interest" (352). When Rufus tells Esther the story for the first time, the narrator refers to "her step-father's long-pent-up experience" (354). After the passage that describes Rufus's confession (see above), where the question of what is real fatherhood is posed partly by the ironical uses of "only," the two of them are mostly "father" and "daughter" again, both in their words to each other and in the narrator's references. Once Esther speaks of the other man as her "first father" (356), and for a while she still thinks of him as her "real father." But Silas is her "present father." And for the rest of the book *father* and *daughter* are the words they and the narrator use.

Unlike the situation in *Silas Marner*, there is no competing father alive, no relative to question the importance of Esther's bond to Rufus in terms of duty. Esther's dilemma about whether to accept the inheritance of the Transome estate becomes a choice of which world, which class identity, she wants—whether she should marry Harold Transome, who is interested in her mostly because he hopes to keep a claim to the estate that is now legally hers, or Felix Holt, who by contrast has vowed that he will never be rich and would refuse to marry her if she accepted the inheritance. The possibilities that she might accept the inheritance and not marry anyone, or that Rufus could move with her to Transome Court, are briefly raised and then denied.

As in *Silas Marner*, nature imagery is an important preparation for the adoptee's choice, but here it is associated with Felix (rather than Rufus) and, more explicitly than in *Silas Marner*, with opposition to social convention and to the artificiality of Esther's previous values. Earlier in the novel, Esther's thoughts of Felix in his absence, "mixed with some longings for a better understanding," are analyzed thus: "in our spring-time every day has its hidden growths in the mind, as it has in the earth when the little folded blades are getting ready to pierce the ground" (292). In the afternoon of the day on which Rufus tells her about her heredity, Felix takes Esther for a walk through the fields. The

issue is not simply nature, but spontaneous, unconventional nature, as the epigraph, drawn from Coriolanus's attack on custom, emphasizes: "walking alone with Felix might be a subject of remark—all the more because of his cap, patched boots, no cravat, and thick stick. Esther was a little amazed herself at what she had come to. So our lives glide on: the river ends we don't know where, and the sea begins, and then there is no more jumping ashore" (360). Felix's emphasis on nature revises the language of blood, so that its favorable sense no longer refers only to aristocratic heredity: "I have the blood of a line of handicraftsmen in my veins, and I want to stand up for the lot of the handicraftsmen as a good lot, in which a man may be better trained to all the best functions of his nature than if he belonged to the grimacing set who have visiting-cards, and are proud to be thought richer than their neighbours" (366). Like a hero of pastoral literature, Felix chooses to withdraw from "the push and the scramble for money and position" and prefers to observe "how beautiful those stooping birch-stems are with the light on them" (362). He believes that his choice is understandable because of "my history or my nature" (360), suggesting that they point in the same direction.

Harold, on the other hand, chooses a kind of progress opposed to nature, cutting down trees and memories. Esther perceives that "the utmost enjoyment of his own advantages was the solvent that blended pride in his family and position, with the adhesion to changes that were to obliterate tradition and melt down enchased gold heirlooms into plating for the egg-spoons of 'the people'" (529).

In Bycliffe, Esther's genetic father, aristocratic rank was combined with nobility of character. Rufus recalls from his wife's words that he was "beautiful to the eye, and good and generous; and that his family was of those who have been long privileged among their fellows" (356). But that combination of aristocracy and generosity is lost to Harold and the other Transomes, who currently hold the estate that should have gone to Bycliffe and are portrayed in devastating terms. Mrs. Transome suffers the consequences of her long-ago affair with Jermyn, her lawyer, in his mishandling of her estate as well as in Harold's determination to sue him for it; she is miserably unhappy in her relations with both men as well as with her apparently senile husband, whom she scorns. Esther knows that Harold has "a padded yoke ready for the neck of every man, woman, and child that depended on him" (538). And to further undercut the Transome family, Esther's discovery of her heredity is par-

alleled with Harold Transome's discovery, near the end of the novel, that Jermyn is really his genetic father—so Harold is not even a legitimate heir of the Transomes, even apart from the fact that their claim legally belongs to the Bycliffes. The Transomes' false position, and Harold's doubly false position as a Transome, are presented as corresponding to their moral defects.

The novel emphasizes Esther's divided feelings about marrying Harold. She is drawn to him by what the narrator calls "native tendencies" (548), associated with her aristocratic ancestry, but these are tendencies "against which she had once begun to struggle." She sees marrying Harold as the road to "a life of middling delights" instead of the "high mountain air" (547) of Felix and his life of both nature and aspiration. She also feels "generous sympathy for the Transomes" (548) and, motherless herself, responds to Mrs. Transome's desire to mother her.

Two dramatic events push her in the other direction. One is Felix's imprisonment for inciting a riot, when he was actually trying to calm the crowd. She visits him in prison and is irresistibly drawn to speak in his defense at his trial. The other is the talk with Mrs. Transome, after Harold's paternity has been exposed, in which Esther sees the "tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection" (597). This vision destroys any appeal that life as another Mrs. Transome might have had for her.

How does this novel ultimately imagine Esther's identity as an adoptee? Esther's last conversation with Felix in the novel, where their life together is pledged, touches on issues in her heredity: they joke about her curls, of which she says "they cost nothing—they are natural" (601), and she plans to teach French, at least to him. But she identifies herself not as the "delicate creature" he calls her but as "very healthy. Poor women, I think, are healthier than the rich" (602). Eliot has used the adoption/discovery plot to emphasize Esther's choice of the class of her adopted father rather than of her biological father. (While her work as a French teacher comes from Rufus's decision to encourage her to do more work in her mother's language, in her refusal of delicacy she is choosing against, at least, Rufus's image of her mother as "of delicate nurture" (165).

Esther's choice against taking her hereditary place stands out in a novel where heredity is such a repeated theme. We hear of "blind hereditary Tories" (152), "sound hereditary British manner" (190), "heredi-

tary bias and class interest" (195). In the cases of both Esther and Harold, the physical similarity across generations is dramatic, and it is not only physical. When Esther begins to behave more sympathetically to Rufus, he says, "Child, what has happened? you have become the image of your mother to-night" (245). To someone who has seen them both, "Esther's features and expression, and still more her bearing, now she stood and walked, revived Bycliffe's image" (348). When Jermyn tells Harold, during a fight, "I am your father," and Harold looks at Jermyn's face in a mirror "with his own beside . . . [he] saw the hated fatherhood reasserted" (581). Harold has long wondered why he had "the trick of getting fat" (90) when his father was so thin; Harold and Jermyn roll their fingers in the same way, and Jermyn thinks that Harold "has inherited a deuced faculty for business" (286). Harold has unknowingly behaved in an entrepreneurial manner similar to that of the biological father he hates—a foundling who is probably also illegitimate (see 125). Esther is drawn toward a life associated with her heredity and with her upbringing in France, but ultimately rejects it. Heredity is influential, but not all-determining. And the use of the word *hereditary* in phrases like "the old hereditary printer" (373) sometimes seems like mockery, as in *Silas Marner*.

In both *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*, Eliot is reversing the old plot in which the adopted child discovers an aristocratic background that permits marriage into an aristocratic family. Marrying Felix is more complicated than marrying Aaron in *Silas Marner*, however; Felix, who has studied in Glasgow, is cosmopolitan; he often seems out of place among the workers, and there are divisions in him corresponding to Esther's divisions, even though her relationship with him is supposed to bring her wholeness. Although Felix's language has some affinities with that of actual reformers of his time, who included watchmakers and weavers in their ranks, he is clearly presented in an idealized mode.²⁷ Following him as a moral guide thus provides a miraculous solution to Esther's identity problems as an adoptee.

Esther's story in *Felix Holt* also plays off against and reverses the story of the biblical Esther, which valorizes heredity. Her name echoed in Eliot's own time by Dickens's Esther Summerson of *Bleak House* (1852–53), the original Esther was an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. Explicitly recalled when Eliot early in the narrative refers to her character as Queen Esther, the biblical Esther married King Ahasuerus, who did not know she was Jewish. When the king plans to

exterminate the Jews in his country under the influence of his evil counselor Haman, Mordecai asks her to plead with the king. In the climactic moment of this book, Esther speaks out, revealing her ancestry, and asking the king to spare the lives of her people. The king relents. Eliot and many of her readers would have known this story not only through the Bible but also through the Racine play and the Handel opera.²⁸

In Eliot's *Esther's* climactic moment, she too speaks out to save someone. When Felix is in trial for his behavior during the riot, Esther intervenes to tell what she knows about his wish to quiet the disturbance and to testify to his kindness and what she calls his noble nature. While this does not sway the judge, it persuades a number of influential men to sign a memorial that ultimately brings about Felix's pardon. Furthermore, Esther's act consolidates her decision that her place is with Felix and his moral leadership rather than with Harold and his wealth, a decision for a life closer to her adoptive father's than her biological father's. While the biblical Esther spoke at the same time for her adoptive parent and her hereditary community, which he shared, this Esther chooses her adoptive community. But both Eliot's Esther and the Bible's make a decision that is also seen in religious terms. The narrator suggests that Esther's choice can give "unity to life, and [make] the memory a temple where all relics and all votive offerings, all worship and all grateful joy, are an unbroken history sanctified by one religion" (551). Her final decision respects both her ministerial adopted father and Felix's secular religion of moral education.

Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876, likewise gives the title character a choice of identities, but this time heredity, rather than nurture, is compelling. Daniel has been raised as the nephew of an English gentleman, but his help to a poor Jewish girl, Mirah, leads to the discovery that he is himself Jewish by ancestry.²⁹ His mother, a former opera singer who felt stifled by Judaism and by his birth, had placed him with his guardian so that he would be free from Judaism and she would be free to sing; thwarted in her career anyway, Leonora tells him her story out of guilt but does not want a continuing relationship with him. Though disappointed in his mother, Daniel is so committed to his newfound identity that at the end he leaves England to help begin a Jewish nation in Palestine. Daniel's development is presented in counterpoint with that of Gwendolen, who marries disastrously to save herself from poverty, and to whom he becomes a mentor.

From early in the novel Daniel wonders about his origins more consistently and intensely than Eppie and Esther.³⁰ Reading Renaissance church history, the thirteen-year-old Daniel discovers that *nephew* could be a euphemism for *illegitimate son*. He at once applies this to himself, with a sudden sense of loss, disillusionment with his beloved guardian Sir Hugo, and “the idea that others probably knew things concerning him which they did not choose to mention, and which he would not have had them mention.”³¹ Although as an adolescent his “tastes were altogether in keeping with his nurture” (143), he notices that no one in the gallery of family pictures looks like him. He is embarrassed and angry when his uncle asks him if he would like to be a great singer, because he knows that singing is not a career for gentlemen like his uncle. While curious about his heredity, Daniel never asks his uncle about it, both because he thinks his uncle wants secrecy and because he doesn’t want to “bring himself near even a silent admission of the sore that had opened in him” (145). As a consequence, Daniel seems reserved when other boys talk about their families. His speculations about his heredity are turned into persistent silent questions about whom he looks like and into sympathy for his unknown mother, who he feels was wronged, and by extension for all women.

The novel also prepares for Daniel’s choice by showing Sir Hugo’s lapses of sensitivity. Sir Hugo is a kindly man, a much more appealing adoptive parent than most of the adoptive mothers discussed in the previous chapter but more critically presented than most of the adoptive fathers. He keeps Daniel’s heredity secret, and this focuses the novel’s critique of him specifically on that secrecy about Daniel’s difference from himself.³² Earlier in Daniel’s life, Sir Hugo had told him, “You lost your father and mother when you were quite a little one” (139), and a little later, encouragingly, “The best horse will win in spite of pedigree” (138), which presumably reinforces Daniel’s sense that his own pedigree is bad. Otherwise he never discusses the matter until he is forced to do so late in the book. The narrator tells us that he is pleased that Daniel is generally thought of as his son: “his imagination had never once been troubled with the way in which the boy himself might be affected, either then or in the future, by the enigmatic aspect of his circumstances. . . . what could be more natural [that word again] than that he should have a beautiful boy like the little Deronda to take care of?” (148).

Nevertheless, Sir Hugo does not choose to be called Daniel’s father or foster father, and the novel does not play much with variations on

the word *father*, in describing him. Instead, the narrator suggests that Sir Hugo regards him as a possession, at best a pet, at worst an object: “a convenience in the family . . . this substitute for a son” (192–93). Most devastatingly, Daniel himself realizes that Hugo regards children as “a product intended to make life more agreeable to the full-grown, whose convenience alone was to be consulted in the disposal of them.” Daniel half-excuses Hugo with the thought that this attitude “was massively acted on at that date of the world’s history” (612), but this observation adds to Eliot’s social critique, hinting at obliviousness to children in families made more conventionally than Hugo’s and Daniel’s.³³

Unlike Silas’s child-rearing, furthermore, Sir Hugo’s care for Daniel is seldom described with imagery of natural growth. Late in the novel, when Daniel is wondering about how to behave if his ancestry is Jewish, he does describe his upbringing as giving rise to “Feelings which have struck root through half my life” (430). But along with his affection for Hugo, there has grown in Daniel an “early-rooted feeling that his birth had been attended with injury for which his father [Hugo] was to blame” (237).

Nature imagery, by contrast, is much more intense in the language used by Mordecai (Mirah’s brother) about the restored Jewish nation he envisions: “Is it rational to drain away the sap of special kindred that makes the families of man rich in interchanged wealth, and various as the forests are various with the glory of the cedar and the palm?” (451). Daniel longs to be part of an organic social unit, and Mordecai, convinced they are related, offers him one: “Have we not quivered together like the leaves from a common stem with stirrings from a common root?” (489). When he discovers his Jewish birth, Daniel picks up this imagery in speaking to his mother: “Your will was strong, but my grandfather’s trust which you accepted and did not fulfil—what you call his yoke—is the expression of something stronger, with deeper, farther-spreading roots” (568).³⁴

The imagery of roots in this novel, unlike the nature imagery of *Silas Marner*, does not emphasize the conscious choice of the nurturer. Where imagery of active nurturing occurs, *Deronda* is clearly dealing with a different issue than the child rearing of *Silas*. He speaks of “the men who had the visions which, as Mordecai said, were the creators and feeders of the world—moulding and feeding the more passive life which without them would dwindle and shrivel into the narrow tenacity of insects” (586).

The imagery suggests, furthermore, that while his mother, Leonora, provided “natural parentage,” she herself is associated not with nature, but rather with the mythic and preternatural. Leonora is ill, and her disease appears to be terminal and caused by guilt. Eliot describes her as “a Melusina, who had ties with some world which is independent of ours . . . a mysterious Fate rather than the longed-for mother” (536), “a sorceress who would stretch forth her wonderful hand and arm to mix youth-potions for others, but scorned to mix them for herself, having had enough of youth” (565), “a dreamed visitant from some region of departed mortals” (571).

We might compare the treatment of Leonora with that of Eppie’s birth father, Godfrey. Godfrey’s failure to acknowledge his daughter is presented as rather ordinary, while Leonora, most often referred to as “the Princess,” has behaved in an extraordinary way. Godfrey is punished by having no children in his marriage, but Leonora, though she has children, sounds emotionally removed from them as well as Daniel, as if she had been cast out of the world of human connection. This difference results partly from the different emotional weight carried by birth mothers as opposed to birth fathers.

Could any woman live up to the image of the lost mother that this novel evokes? Before Daniel’s early life is revealed, several characters in its other main plot participate in staging a scene from *The Winter’s Tale*, in which a lost mother appears to come to life out of a statue and speaks in a way that fulfills all needs of her now-grown child. As the scene appears in *Deronda*, however, the child is missing, and Gwendolen, who is playing the role of Hermione, shrieks in terror at the sudden appearance of a dead face at the moment when she should act out her return to life. The nightmarish transformation of the Shakespeare’s happy ending foreshadows the way Daniel’s mother too finds the role of the returning mother too difficult to play.

Our culture is full of successful reunion plots like that in *The Winter’s Tale*. Daniel has made up similar plots in his own daydreams. When he finally sees his mother, he thinks, “He had lived through so many ideal meetings with his mother, and they had seemed more real than this!” (535). In his fantasies she has been sacred: “To Daniel the words Father and Mother had the altar-fire in them, and the thought of all closest relations of our nature held still something of the mystic power which had made his neck and ears burn in boyhood” (402).

At the same time his idea of his mother has also been associated with

fear since he was thirteen, when he first thought of himself as Sir Hugo's son born out of wedlock. Seeing a "forsaken" girl about to attempt suicide, he thinks "perhaps my mother was like this one" (162). Furthermore, as he learns that this girl, Mirah, is searching for *her* mother, the fear spreads. He assumes his mother is a "fallen woman" and probably a prostitute. For Daniel, sexuality is dangerous, and thus he distances himself from his own.

When he finally meets Leonora, he learns that both his pictures of the fallen woman and his pictures of the "ideal meetings" are false. A respectable woman whose passions have been devoted to her art, Leonora was once a true star. She speaks with convincing fervor of "the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—'this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt'" (541). This scene suddenly introduces a different world—for previously women's complaints about restrictions have appeared only in the mouth of Gwendolen, who is often framed as frivolous. Leonora had the discipline and musical talent Gwendolen lacked. And yet after the fascination with which the book has depicted Jewish culture, Leonora too can sound shallow when she complains, "I was to love the long prayers in the ugly synagogue, and the howling, and the gabbling, and the dreadful fasts, and the tiresome feasts, and my father's endless discoursing about Our People, which was a thunder without meaning in my ears . . . I wanted to live a large life, with freedom to do what every one else did, and be carried along in a great current, not obliged to care" (540). Note the self-contradiction in the desire for both freedom and conformity; they are presumably linked in her mind because she equates freedom with assimilation to gentile England.

Eliot, so often interested in the physical similarities between relatives, points them out in this scene; Daniel, whose face in the mirror had for him long been associated with the thought of someone else he resembled and had never seen, now finds that similar face. But physical resemblance is combined with opposition of values, in an irony Eliot also uses in novels where the related characters have always lived as a family. She articulates this most memorably in *Adam Bede*, where she calls Nature the "great tragic dramatist" who "knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains . . . and ties us by our heart strings to the beings that jar us at every move-

ment.”³⁵ Daniel has longed for familial and communal identity, and a sense of duty—Leonora felt oppressed by her father and her inherited Judaism, and was happy only as an opera star in a life she describes as “a myriad lives in one” (537) with “no bonds” (547). Among the many images she uses to explain her rejection of Judaism is one associating it with an animal nature that she scorns: “I was not, like a brute, obliged to go with my own herd” (544).

Daniel at his most dispassionate can make “room for that effort at just allowance and that admiration of a forcible nature whose errors lay along high pathways, which he would have felt if, instead of being his mother, she had been a stranger who had appealed to his sympathy” (542). Indeed his very sympathy for her is painful. He offers to help her, but she can accept little from him and can give him no unblocked emotion in return. “Is it not possible that I could be near you often and comfort you?” he asks, and she responds, “No, not possible . . . I have a husband and five children. None of them know of your existence” (547). So this formerly brave and unconventional woman keeps on maintaining secrets and lies.

In their second and last meeting, it is clear that she feels deeply troubled. She is preoccupied with her dead father, who wanted a grandson and who, she feels, is now getting his revenge in Daniel’s love of Judaism. She hopes that in giving Daniel his family history, she will lose her obsession with her father’s judgment against her. In spite of her hatred of Judaism, she invokes its ritual prayer for the dead; “if you think *Kaddish* will help me—say it, say it. You will come between me and the dead. When I am in your mind, you will look as you do now—always as if you were a tender son,—always—as if I had been a tender mother” (569). But when she begins to imagine what their life would have been like together, her choice seems inevitable: “you would have hampered my life with your young growth from the old root” (571). Leonora confesses, “I am not a loving woman” (571). Daniel is left with “a grave, sad sense of his mother’s privation. . . . All his boyish yearnings and anxieties about his mother had vanished. He had gone through a tragic experience which must forever solemnize his life, and deepen the significance of the acts by which he bound himself to others” (571).

What a nemesis George Eliot places on the birth mother! But her powerful lines have the eloquence of the determined female artist/individualist. Eliot’s own history suggests that she was drawing on some of her feelings in writing the dialogue between Daniel and Leonora. Her

ability to project herself into both speakers significantly contributes to this scene. Rosemarie Bodenheimer has suggested a more specific biographical resonance in Eliot's relationship with her stepchildren. By the time Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*, her two younger stepsons, Thornie and Bertie, had both died. Unlike Charles, they had lived with her only briefly. Thornie came home to die while she was writing *Middlemarch*. Thornie had been, according to Lewes's journal, "shipped off to Natal, well equipped with funds, outfit, and letters, to seek a career for himself there."³⁶ Bertie had followed him to the Transvaal. Bodenheimer demonstrates that Eliot and Lewes occasionally wondered about their behavior with regard to these stepsons, and concluded that they had done the best they could have. Her conjecture that Eliot was emotionally somewhat removed from these stepsons puts a different light on Leonora's withdrawal.³⁷

But the significance of this episode in the book is not limited to its connection to Eliot's biography. What it provides is, among other things, one of the most detailed pictures in literature of a confrontation between adoptee and birth mother. Possible issues in these meetings—guilt, forgiveness, family history, secrecy, and alternative pasts—are explored with a profundity provided by no other work of literature that I know. In *Oedipus*, Jocasta kills herself before she and her son can have this conversation. Nor does literature provide such talks with birth fathers. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita and her mother express happiness at being reunited, but when the family is miraculously restored, neither confronts Leontes about his earlier decision to get rid of his daughter. Even in Eliot's own *Silas Marner*, when Eppie discovers that Godfrey is her birth father, the scene ends with a much shorter dialogue between the two of them.

It may seem ironic that a work where the adoptee chooses hereditary identity has the most explicit confrontation with a birth parent. Perhaps it is not ironic but logical. If this were a reunion that reconstituted a family, the novel might end in the let-by-gones-be-by-gones spirit of Shakespearean conclusions. But since Leonora does not want to continue her relationship with Daniel, the more important heredity is to Daniel, the more she must account for her behavior. Two aspects of hereditary identity are at stake for Daniel—being a Jew and being a son. Although his mother will not acknowledge him publicly, he can still regain his heredity by identifying as a Jew.

In *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt* the adoptee chooses her adoptive father over biological ancestry. In *Deronda* the adoptee chooses biological ancestry, even though his biological mother rejects him again. Did Eliot simply change her mind about what aspect of identity was more important for the adoptee? I have suggested that in *Felix Holt* she was using adoption to dramatize the demand for a choice between two ways of life. Given the similar structural use of adoption in the later work, are there any other similarities in her treatment of adoption in these novels in spite of their different outcomes?

The most consistent element in Eliot's treatment of adoption is the critique of the English aristocracy's attitude toward children, those they adopt and those they beget. Godfrey Cass is negligent, Sir Hugo is generous but insensitive, Mrs. Transome hated her first-born son, and Harold shows little concern for his. Turning away from a rich but cold world, in each case the adoptee chooses the group that is more oppressed, whether because of class or poverty (in *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*) or race/ethnicity (in *Deronda*).

The adoptee also always chooses the group or person more associated with religion or religious imagery or language.³⁸ Eppie's Silas has returned to religion, wanting to do what is best for her. Esther's choice of the dedicated Felix and the devout Rufus is described in religious language. Daniel chooses a Judaism associated strongly with religious mysticism and ritual; the institutional Christianity that he leaves is dismal. The Reverend Mr. Gascoyne, for example, urges Gwendolen to the financially advantageous but loveless and ultimately disastrous marriage to Grandcourt. In spite of Eliot's own dissent from any organized religion, in these novels she presents the heritage with spiritual value as preferable to the heritage with material value. The successful adoptions are into households that have a religious sense of community, though the faith in which Silas has Eppie baptized and the faith that provides a common ground between Rufus and Felix do not have much specific propositional content.

Each novel is in part a rejection of the dominant upper-class English culture and a critique of certain kinds of family dynamics, especially secrecy and treating children as possessions and conveniences. In *Silas Marner*, the biological father is secretive, while Silas is completely open. Rufus abandons secrecy with Esther when he believes that knowing her history might help her. In *Deronda* the adoptive father Sir Hugo tells

the truth only when forced, after Daniel has for a long time lived with a completely false picture of his heredity. The adoptive father Silas provides hands-on care; Rufus cared for Esther during her mother's illness; Sir Hugo enjoys being with Dan, but the novel doesn't show much of his role as a caregiver. On one level the adoptee's choice in *Silas and Deronda* may be a consequence of deficiencies in parenting. In *Silas Marner* Eppie's choice is a reward for Silas. But Hugo's flaws in parenting do not completely account for Daniel's choice, since his biological mother does less for him than Sir Hugo does, and is hobbled by her own continuing wish for secrecy.

While the movement from *Silas Marner* to *Daniel Deronda* might suggest that Eliot came to value heredity later in her life, a more thorough look at her novels and her letters shows that she always believed in the potential importance of both nurture and inheritance. As early as *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot presents Caterina's difficulties in the Cheverel household in part as a consequence of their failure to understand her (stereotypically Italian) passionate nature. In a letter written close to this time, she notes as a limitation in the natural philosopher Buckle that he "holds that there is no such thing as *race* or *hereditary transmission* of qualities," and in a letter on *Adam Bede* she comments on the influence of his "peasant blood and nurture" (GEL 2:415, 3:60). Still, as she moved from one novel to another, the aspect of influence that she emphasized changed.

From the first to the third of the novels discussed in this chapter, the adoptive father becomes less idealized, the adoptee feels more different, and national contrasts grow more significant. *Silas Marner* is an idyll or a fable, *Felix Holt* a political novel, and *Daniel Deronda*, in its adoption/discovery plot, a kind of epic. By the time of *Deronda*, Eliot was less interested in redefining family relationships to valorize adoption than in other issues. As the ideas of nationalism and blood increasingly preoccupied nineteenth-century Europe, Eliot wrote novels that meditated more on the problematics of adopting across difference.³⁹ The greater the emphasis on ethnic and cultural difference, the more the adoptee is likely to choose genetic identity. Eppie notices her physical difference from Silas and the other girls of her town, but no one else does, and it is clearly much less important to her than her love for Silas and Aaron and her related feeling: "I like the working-folks, and their houses, and their ways" (173). *Felix Holt* invokes national difference: Esther's mother is French, and Rufus sends her to a French school. Her

differences from Rufus are linked in part to the national differences between the French and the English (which come in Esther's case from environment as well as from heredity) as well as with her genetic father's aristocratic ancestry. These differences strain Esther's relationship with Rufus, and Felix's mediation is required to mend it. In *Deronda* the issue of racial difference, as Eliot considered it, is central. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, to whose work in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Eliot felt an affinity, she describes the novel as an effort to counter "the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews" and "to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. . . . There is 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" (GEL 6:301–2). One of the people who had most influenced Eliot in the particular concerns of *Daniel Deronda* was a friend who died just as she was beginning the novel and provided a model for Mordecai—Emanuel Deutsch, a scholar who gave her Hebrew lessons, emphasized the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, and wrote about his strong emotions on finally visiting Jerusalem.⁴⁰

As an apparently ideal English gentleman doing research on Judaism, Daniel evidently was intended to inform Eliot's readers and disarm their prejudices.⁴¹ One of her points is that Daniel benefits from learning not only about his birth parents, but also about his connection to a valuable cultural tradition and community. Indeed, when Eliot used the word "race," the meaning was partly cultural because of her Lamarckian belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics (what we now call culture)—experience transmitted by heredity.⁴² The most important part of Jewishness for Daniel is not simply biology, but the Jewish culture that his mother has rejected. And it is Mordecai and Mirah, whom he marries at the end of the novel, who consolidate this part of his identity. Although Daniel says, "I am finding the clue of my life in the recognition of my natural parentage" (643), Mordecai's "spiritual parentage" [Daniel's term] is at least as important.⁴³ Named after the biblical Mordecai, adoptive parent to the biblical Esther, Mordecai passes on his vision to Daniel; even their names signal their affinity because both their namesakes in the Bible are, like these characters, dreamers and interpreters of prophetic dreams. So in some ways *Deronda* too can fit Bodenheimer's generalization about Eliot's privi-

leging of fostering over kinship. Sir Hugo is an inadequate foster parent for Daniel, but Mordecai is the spiritual parent he really needs. As Gillian Beer says, Eliot recognizes, in herself and her culture, the “drive back toward origins, the Oedipus story” and counters it “with an equally intense movement toward differentiation, expansion, lateral kinning, fostering and foster parenting, and sympathetic generalisation, which all create new and multiple relationships.”⁴⁴ Daniel leaves behind his loss of childhood fostering (of the sort that Rufus and Silas give) to pursue the fostering that Mordecai provides—meeting his need for vocation, tradition, and identity.

With the combination of his heredity and Mordecai’s “spiritual parentage,” Daniel is able to enter into a Jewish culture that is enough of an “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s term, to become a nation. The novel includes explicit parallels between Jewish and Italian nationalisms. Mirah sings “O Patria Mia,” Leopardi’s grand ode to Italy (414), and Daniel takes Mazzini’s struggle for a united Italy as a model for the possible rebirth of a Jewish nation (457). But other kinds of nationalism are evoked too: Scottish—suggesting a parallel between the situation of Scotland and the Jews in England developed by Sir Walter Scott—and American.⁴⁵ Early in his life Daniel “easily forgot his own existence in that of Robert Bruce” (143), a hero of Scottish nationalism, and tells his tutor that he would like to be a “leader, like Pericles or Washington” (147).

Daniel’s desire to be such a leader—and his eventual commitment to political leadership at the end of the novel—had special meaning in England at the time of the novel’s writing. Benjamin Disraeli, a Jew converted at a young age to Christianity but still maintaining a strong identification with Judaism, was prime minister. As Ragussis has shown, Daniel is a kind of fantasy transformation of Disraeli, whose emphasis on what Jewishness and Christianity have in common is echoed in some of the dialogue in Eliot’s novel. In Eliot’s early letters she had strong criticisms to make of the “fellowship of race” (GEL 1:246)—referring to Judaism—in Disraeli’s novels, but Eliot’s views about Judaism and race changed later in her career. Deronda and Disraeli “both are descended not only from English and Italian Jews but from those Iberian Jews persecuted and banished in the late fifteenth century,” Ragussis points out.⁴⁶ He argues convincingly that the plot of *Daniel Deronda* “functions symbolically to liberate Disraeli to do what his critics accused him of doing, under cover of being the leader of

Protestant England—to represent his own ancestral people, to seek their best interest.”⁴⁷ And he demonstrates that the preparation for leadership Deronda receives from his double identity—Jewish ancestry, Christian English education—rewrites a frequently hostile comparison often made between Disraeli and the prototypical adoptee Moses.

Before Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*, she wrote another work in which the adoptee chooses to follow heredity in a way that confers leadership of a previously unknown people—*The Spanish Gypsy*. Here, as in *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*, the adoptee, Fedalma, is female. In this poetic drama, Eliot loads the dice in favor of heredity even more than in *Deronda*. Fedalma has no living adoptive parent. The conflict is between the Gypsy father from whom she was stolen and a Spanish fiancé. Before discovering her father, she already dances with a Gypsy-like freedom that transgresses the codes for Spanish women. In her “Notes on the Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy,” Eliot argues that the importance of race in the plot is “a symbol of the part which is played in the general human lot by hereditary conditions in the largest sense, and of the fact that what we call duty is entirely made up of such conditions; even in the cases of just antagonism to the narrow view of hereditary claims [perhaps this is where she would place Eppie’s antagonism to Godfrey’s claim], the whole background of the particular struggle is made up of our inherited nature.”⁴⁸

Following heredity requires Fedalma to renounce her fiancé, and Eliot says that she developed an interest in such a plot by considering a portrait of the Annunciation, which she imagines as depicting a woman chosen because of her heredity [Mary was of the House of David, as predicted by the prophets for the ancestry of the Messiah] “to fulfil a great destiny, entailing a terribly different experience from that of ordinary womanhood.” For all human beings adjusting to necessity, “partly as to our natural constitution, partly as sharers of life with our fellow-beings,” Eliot says, “Tragedy consists in the terrible difficulty of this adjustment.”

A woman whose destiny cannot be the “ordinary lot of womanhood”: a reader who knows Eliot’s life cannot help but think about how autobiographical these reflections are, as well as how relevant they are to the restrictions that requirements of the “lot of womanhood” place on each of her heroines. On one level, the situation of Fedalma, as of most of her female characters, can be taken as an allegory for the conflict between a woman’s individuality and social expectation, mar-

riage, or love.⁴⁹ On a more literal level, however, the drama, in its tragic mode, portrays how wrenching the conflict between adopted and genetic identity can be, especially if the only living parent is associated with both genetic identity and a historically oppressed group.

But *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, and indeed, *Daniel Deronda* were not written in a tragic mode, though *Deronda* comes closest. While *The Spanish Gypsy* requires Fedalma to renounce the fiancé she still loves, each of the novels promises the adoptee a marriage that in an idealized way meets her or his needs. Furthermore, in each one the adoptee makes at least one gesture toward the *other* identity—biological or adoptive, the identity that is not chosen. Eppie allows Godfrey to pay for her wedding, though no one knows why. Esther keeps her natural curls and can improve Felix's French accent. *Daniel Deronda* goes furthest to articulate the multiple loyalties of the adoptee's situation at the end. In *Deronda*, Daniel says to his mother, "The effect of my education can never be done away with. . . . The Christian sympathies in which my mind was reared can never die out of me. . . . I will admit that there may come some benefit from the education you chose for me. I prefer cherishing the benefit with gratitude, to dwelling with resentment on the injury. I think it would have been right that I should have been brought up with the consciousness that I was a Jew, but it must always have been a good to me to have as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible" (566–67).

To use a modern phrase, Daniel is a cultural hybrid.⁵⁰ As Gillian Beer says, he is "enriched by the multiple past, both genetic and cultural."⁵¹ Though he wants to found a Jewish nation, he knows that he cannot return to a pure Judaism from the past: "I shall call myself a Jew. . . . But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races" (620). Daniel's words, the narrator's, and even Mordecai's value both nation-building and diversity. "We English are a miscellaneous people" (85), says the narrator, invoking the late Victorian commonplace that English people came from a variety of ethnic traditions—even if not as various as today.⁵² Mrs. Meyrick, the best mother in the novel, possesses a "happy mixture of Scottish caution with her Scottish fervour and Gallic liveliness" (484). Klesmer, similarly, is a "felicitous combination of the German, the Slave [Slav], and the Semite." When Mordecai describes his vision of a Jewish nation, he imagines it as carrying "the culture and the sympa-

thies of every great nation in its bosom" (456), not only as "purified" but also as "enriched by the experience our greatest sons have gathered from the life of the ages. . . . Only two centuries since a vessel carried over the ocean the beginning of the great North American nation. The people grew like meeting waters—they were various in habit and sect. . . . What had they to form a polity with but memories of Europe, corrected by the vision of a better?" (458).

Much as I would like to stress Daniel's hybridity, however, his final discussions of his identity seem more unified than this term suggests. His upbringing outside Judaism is placed in a very Jewish context: he has been prepared, "as Moses was prepared, to serve [his] people the better" (641). He identifies himself without qualification as a Jew, "enjoying one of those rare moments when our yearnings and our acts can be completely one, and the real we behold is our ideal good" (640), and compares himself to "the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind—the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music" (642). These images of the unified self and the musical instrument finally played are very similar to those Eliot uses of Esther when she defends Felix in court and thereby aligns herself with her adoptive father more than with her heredity ("some hand had touched the chords, and there came forth music that brought tears" [chap. 46; 573]). Both novels show a longing for a unified identity, and use imagery to suggest it has been achieved. But in both, the chosen identity, the alliance with a subordinate group and the vocation to help them, is actually more complex.

Daniel's resolution of his identity reconciles several potentially conflicting ideological currents of the time. On the one hand, racial and biological concepts of nationhood were becoming more widespread, and the revelation of Daniel's original parentage, with the discovery of his "ancestral life" and "inherited [frame]" appeals to such concepts. On the other hand, Daniel's choice of Judaism, like the choices of Eliot's earlier adoptees, can also be seen as an act of sympathy, though in David Marshall's phrase it is more obviously "far-reaching" than theirs.⁵³ As Eliot emphasizes, it is partial, not universal sympathy, but

the same is true of Eppie's choice of Silas and the poor instead of Godfrey and the rich. But in *Deronda* we see more of the way that sympathy brings what is distant close, and the special paradox that the strangers to whom sympathy brings Daniel close are in some ways already close to him without his knowledge.

As Beer points out, there are many links in Eliot's novels between sympathy and adoption.⁵⁴ With both, Eliot explores relationships that are not confined to the biological family. Using adoption permits her to explore two kinds of what Judith Modell has called "kinship with strangers," both adoptive kinship and the kinship of the adoptee with unknown relatives.⁵⁵ Arguably, adoption can be seen as a kind of paradigmatic gesture of sympathy—taking on responsibility for another—which often then presents the adult adoptee with the further challenge of where he or she will, in turn, offer sympathy. But if adoption is an act that Eliot often associated with sympathy, her portrayal of some adoptive parents enacts what could be called either a critique of sympathy or a critique of apparent sympathy unaware of its object's real needs. While Silas and Rufus show sympathy, Eliot's earliest portrayal of adoption shows its lack when Lady Cheverel brings Caterina up partly because "it would be a Christian work to train this little Papist into a good Protestant, and graft as much English fruit as possible on the Italian stem" (*Clerical Life*, 103). Similarly, Sir Hugo's wish to raise Daniel doesn't bring an understanding of Daniel's feelings.

Sympathy has often been gendered as feminine; why do Eliot's adoption triangles generally include adoptive fathers and not adoptive mothers? There is little of the play with different meanings of the word *mother* that there is with *father*.⁵⁶ Eliot does not exclude women from nurturing outside the family. Romola adopts both Benedetto and Tito's children by Tessa, Dolly helps Silas bring up Eppie, and Mrs. Meyrick provides a temporary home for Mirah. But Eliot does not focus on the relationship between a woman and her adopted child from infancy to adolescence or older. Perhaps this omission derives from the tradition in classical literature that adoption is a contract between men, or draws on the greater centrality in Shakespeare's romances of adoptive and genetic fathers rather than mothers, or aims at giving sympathy more cultural prestige by attributing it to men, in whom it is taken to have a less biological basis.⁵⁷ Whatever the causes, in all three novels, *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, and *Daniel Deronda*, the focus on an adopting father dramatizes more emphatically the continued loss of the birth mother.

Raised by men, Eppie, Esther, and Daniel all wonder about the woman who bore them in a way they might not if they had adoptive mothers. Furthermore, because Silas and Rufus don't have wives and are less social than Sir Hugo (who marries late in the novel), their relationship with their daughters involves more emotional need and dependence on the fathers' part. The maternal absence poses the question of how much the fathers will take on maternal nurturing—Silas does so much more than Sir Hugo.

In exploring parental relationships complicated by adoption, Eliot moves away from the celebration of maternal instinct common in her society. The women who nurture outside their family, the men who adopt, and the unmaternal mothers such as Leonora, all provide implicit arguments against the view that nurturing is an instinctive capacity determined by women's biology alone.⁵⁸ Biology is not destiny in Eliot's mothers or in Eppie or Esther's choice of family.

Daniel is the only one of Eliot's adoptees with a living birth mother and a dead birth father and the only one whose dead grandfather is a strong presence. This gender distribution is inextricably entwined with the novel's complex consideration of Judaism and of women's experiences versus cultural ideas about women. Daniel must have a Jewish mother to be Jewish by blood, and his mythic image of what his birth mother will be like is rather like the traditional Jewish image of woman; Leonora does not fit into either. His grandfather's love of Jewish traditions and, especially, longing for a grandson, are presented in the novel as at the same time oppressive to Leonora and appealing to Daniel.

While most of Eliot's adoptive parents are male, most of her adoptees are female. However, both Eliot and her critics often call Daniel feminine, or attribute to him qualities conventionally considered feminine. Following a long cultural tradition, the novel encourages thought about analogies between prejudices and restrictions against women (from which Gwendolen suffers) and prejudices against Jews (from which Daniel is apparently protected by his upbringing, but which occur in many characters' casual statements).⁵⁹ The analogy has its positive dimension as well as its negative one; Daniel values Judaism for its transmission of emotion rather as Eliot values cultural femininity ("gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character" GEL [4:469]).

In her own earlier life, Eliot had dealt with restrictions against

women, but her late letters, especially, emphasize her solidarity with women as a group in a way that could be compared to Deronda's attitude toward being a Jew. One might say that her novels had become the woman's homeland she could create, except that Eliot's solidarity with women never implied, either literally or metaphorically, a separate land for women. Eliot could not have the kind of heroic nation-founding life that Daniel chose, and the novel reminds us that no woman could. And when, in *The Spanish Gypsy*, she imagines a female adoptee who becomes committed to leading the oppressed people of her birth, it is in tragic terms.⁶⁰

The heroic position Daniel reaches at the end of the novel is the transformation of several different kinds of outsider status that he has occupied. Whether as adoptee or as bastard, he cannot inherit his uncle's estate. This exclusion also puts him in a position similar to that of women in his society. He shares his inability to inherit his uncle's estate with his uncle's daughters.⁶¹ The novel closely links exclusion related to birth status—seen in the condition of Gwendolen's husband's illegitimate children as well as in Daniel's assumed bastardy—with exclusion related to gender. Before he receives his inheritance, Daniel, as what one might call a “closed-record adoptee,” is in a feminine position in other ways as well. The very situation of being transferred from one family to another, of having their name changed, gives adoptees early in their life an experience of forced adaptability similar to what is expected of women when they are married; Daniel's too diffuse sympathy and his passivity continue this adaptability until his final commitment to build a Jewish nation.

What are the effects of George Eliot's representations of adoption? No doubt the most widely read of her novels that deal with this topic has been *Silas Marner*, which makes a case for the benefits and the naturalness of adoption, the redefinition of family by nurture rather than by genetics, more emphatically than any well-known novel before the twentieth century. But the topic had not been an important focus of writing on this novel until Susan Cohen's article from 1983.⁶² Many adoptive mothers and fathers, and quite likely other parents, have identified with Silas, but I wonder how many adoptees—teenagers who read the novel in high school, or others who read it later—have identified with the idealized Eppie. The negative picture of the birth

mother and birth father may be the most vivid impression they received from it.

Daniel Deronda is the Eliot adoption novel whose readers have left the most extensive record of their responses. Though most of these responses have focused on its representation of Jewishness, they are inextricably entwined with its representation of adoption as well. Many critiques of the book that now sound obviously anti-Semitic also oppose the idea of the adoptee choosing a hereditary identity.⁶³ On the other hand, from 1876 on, Jewish readers reviewed the book enthusiastically, and some identified Daniel's political aims—for which Eliot had drawn on ideas of her friend Emanuel Deutsch—with their own hopes for a Jewish colony in Palestine. In the 1880s on, the book was translated into German, Hebrew (several times), and French. In the words of Terence Cave, on whose research I am drawing, "Large numbers of Jews in Germany and eastern Europe were thus reading a version of the novel for seventy years after its first publication. They associated it with the dream of a national home, which began to take more concrete form in the 1890s with the establishment of the European Zionist movement."⁶⁴ Even Susan Meyer, who finds strong elements of anti-Semitism remaining in the novel in spite of Eliot's intentions, observes that "small streets in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa have even been named after George Eliot."⁶⁵ Though *Deronda's* ending was a fantasy in its own time, arguably the novel has had real historical effects. But the multicultural quality of Mordecai's fantasy nation, modeled on a diversity associated with the United States, is seldom remembered, just as modern Israel, with laws enforcing a particular kind of Judaism, is far from the secular state envisioned by Theodor Herzl.

What does *Deronda* say to readers about adoption? It makes a powerful plea to adoptive parents not to treat their children as insensitively as Sir Hugo. Elements of Daniel's characterization that some critics have found implausible—his failure to question Sir Hugo about his heredity, his apparent asexuality, his extended sense of responsibility—correspond to behavior found by psychologists in someone who has taken on the role of the "good adoptee."⁶⁶ The novel's exploration of pain possible in a cross-cultural adoption—together with the joy possible in affirming a newly discovered culture, even without a continuing relationship to a close biological family—could resonate with many adoptees as well as with those who have lost and found traditions for

other reasons. In focusing on the loss and recovery of Jewishness, the novel deals with an identity particularly targeted by prejudice—and particularly ambiguous about whether it is ethnic or religious—and more hidden even than most heredities in adoptive families. (I am not the only adoptee whose Jewish ancestry was the most secret part of my history.)

Like the much less successful *Spanish Gypsy*, *Daniel Deronda* relates adoptees' discovery of their heredity to a drastic redefinition of their personal and national identity and their vocation. In the simple terms of slogan, the novel makes a powerful case for the view that adoptees must learn their heredity to know who they really are. Furthermore, it demythologizes the fantasy of the ideal birth mother as well as the purely negative image of the fallen woman, the promiscuous and lazy slut. Leonora has made Daniel suffer, but she has a heroism of her own. And, painful as the meeting with her is, Daniel survives.

But if it demythologizes the birth mother, the novel provides other idealized images that help Daniel achieve heroic stature: his mythic grandfather, Mordecai, and Mordecai's vision of a new nation. Though the grandfather appears in the novel only through others' memories, though Mordecai dies at the end of the novel, and though the new nation is only a hope, their images are powerful enough to conclude Daniel's part of the novel with a sense of triumph.

Few if any adoptees today will have the chance to find heroism in rebuilding their ancestral nation. But many will concur with Daniel's desire to know his heredity and hereditary culture, and would like adoptive parents to understand this desire. Yet it is important to historicize beliefs about race, nation, and ethnicity in the novel. Ideas about hereditary racial characteristics common in Eliot's time have been generally discredited by the way similar ideas were used by Hitler.⁶⁷ The progressive nationalism of the late nineteenth century, which united smaller groups into larger nations, has become the rather different nationalism that has been devastating many lands and people in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Belief in hereditary ethnic/racial/national characteristics—as opposed to belief in the importance of cultural history—is an idea that needs to be analyzed rather than assumed.

Is closed adoption like colonialism, like forced conversion, or neither? That depends to a large extent on the atmosphere in the adoptive family and the behavior of the birth parents. Is meeting birth parents

like decolonization? It breaks a silence, unveils a hidden knowledge, but for many of us it provides new questions about identity, rather than answers. The equivalent of decolonization—joining the culture(s) of one's birth parents—may be difficult or impossible in this context; the turn of some postcolonial theorists to embrace cultural hybridity rather than an original purity may be a better model. Important as it was to me to learn my heredity, I feel uncomfortable with the unqualified claim that adoptees need to know their ethnicity to know who they are. I would prefer to argue for open records in terms of history rather than identity. Yet I am also uncomfortable with the thought of a couple I have heard of, who adopted a Russian baby and called him Ryan.

I do not remember having thoughts about my birth mother as often as Daniel did when growing up, but I too developed reticence, caution about sexuality, and even a belief in my wide-ranging sympathy leading to a sense of inaction in a way similar to Daniel's, and I was drawn to the book partly because of this characterization of him—an ironical attraction partly since many readers consider the characterization of Daniel a failure. The novel presents him as having qualities culturally considered female, another dimension of my identification with him as well as of what I have argued elsewhere is Eliot's own. From many standpoints, he seems too idealized, but on the other hand this may well have made him appeal to me more, since he could have some of my limitations and yet become heroic.

He chooses to be a Jew—and I am, now, an Episcopalian with ecumenical interests, who would list Jewishness as one of many ethnicities in my ancestry. This is the personal side of my insistence that his identity decision in the novel is more than a matter of discovering his heredity. What have I learned from studying this book about why our choices are different?

I can hear some readers objecting to the naïveté of this approach to literature. He is a character in a novel; his choices are determined by literary constraints of the plot. I live outside novels. Nevertheless, many works of fiction that touch readers most lead them to expect that their lives will follow plots like those in the fictions. Some may even, as in the case of the eighteenth-century German novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which is thought to have inspired a number of suicides, lead impressionable readers to imitate the plot of the novel. I have shown in earlier chapters the long-standing literary tradition of the plot in which

discovery of ancestry leads characters to a new identity, apparently forgetting the family in which they were raised. This plot still circulates outside literature as a fantasy in the nightmares of some adoptive parents and the daydreams of some adoptees. It is not surprising, then, that the imaginative fullness of *Daniel Deronda* has led me to more thought about differences between its plot and the plot of my life.

There are obvious differences. However feminine, Daniel is a male character. His Jewish heredity is on both sides; his Jewish parent is willing to meet him and give him the legacy of his grandfather in family history. My adoptive mother was a better parent than Sir Hugo; my birth mother is more accepting of me, and braver about telling her family, than his. But perhaps these contrasts need not have been conclusive. Crucially added to them was the difference in our ideological situation. Unlike Daniel at the point of discovering his ancestry, as Eliot presents him, I already had a sense of Christianity as a religion with meaning for me; furthermore, I was already involved in a political movement, feminism. More clearly than Eliot's, my own attitude toward being a woman is something like Daniel's about being a Jew—though no more than Eliot do I believe in a promised land for women.

If my birth father had welcomed contact with me, I might have had a more difficult task of identity reconfiguration. Nevertheless, I have not become an evangelical in spite of the welcome I received from my birth mother.

Unlike Daniel's, my discoveries of ancestry have led to my affirmation of my previous religious tradition, though in a move I will discuss in the afterword, I see that tradition as liberal Christianity more than as Roman Catholicism. Reflecting on his narrative, I see my decision to remain Christian as a choice, but it is a choice conditioned by so many differences between us that it also seems inevitable. But just as Daniel's is presented as in some ways a Judaism with a difference, mine is now a Christianity with a difference, aware of both anti-Semite and Jew among my ancestors, aware of the fantasies about Jews that may have contributed to my conception and even perhaps to some of the ways my adoptive parents thought about me.⁶⁸ The histories of the Jews, of anti-Semitism, of religious persecution and toleration (which affected my adoptive parents too, in other ways) are all part of my history. With this conclusion, the agnostic George Eliot, deeply interested in religious history, would agree.