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George Eliot and the Jewish Question

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

George Eliot and the Jewish Question

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The Jewish Question interrogates the limits of modernity. The tradition of debate on the topic, extending out of Enlightenment thought, left Hegelianism, and the varied itineraries of European nationalism, typically

asks whether and how the particularity of the Jew might be assimilated to, or alternately accommodated by, a project conceived as modern in its pretensions to universality. Beginning with the era of the Enlightenment, the struggles for political emancipation of the Jews acutely raised the question of how desirable or possible it would be for Jewish communities and individuals to resist a fuller cultural assimilation into Christian states or predominantly Christian societies. For example, the Jewish Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn, an early writer on the topic who also actively campaigned for Jewish rights, sought to reconcile Judaism to the project of universal reason, yet simultaneously resisted the common Enlightenment view that humanity in general should take precedence over any assertion of Jewish particularism or guarding of Jewish tradition. By contrast, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist writings on the Jewish Question framed the issue in strongly assimilationist terms, rearticulating the universalist Enlightenment view within the radically emancipatory framework of international class struggle. Different still were the nationalist arguments for assimilation, as evidenced in the sociological theories of Max Weber, whose understanding of modernity entailed a commitment to unified national culture. Weber's position applies the rhetoric of assimilation to the level of the nation, arguing that recalcitrant Jewish traditionalism within Christian states will impede the modern nationalist project.¹

One lesser known but important voice in the history of the Jewish Question was Leopold Zunz, a Jewish-German historian and co-founder in 1819 of the short-lived *Verein für die Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* in Berlin. This organization, which counted the later Christian convert Heinrich Heine among its members, rejected both the Enlightenment absorption of Jews into humanity in general and the nostalgic traditionalism that sought to divorce Judaism from the modern project. Zunz enacted a nineteenth-century version of the conflicted double gesture that characterized Mendelssohn's important earlier contributions. An ardent believer in the possibility of a modern "science **[End Page 39]** of Judaism," Zunz undertook a protracted study of Jewish history, literature, and tradition, zealous to convince his nineteenth-

century European audience of the importance of Judaism to the history and progress of human culture as a whole. Zunz aimed to reconstruct Judaism's distinctive contribution to the project of modernity, thereby exposing the category of assimilation as distorting Judaism's *internal* relation to modern Western culture. While his ultimate position may be unclear, as Emil L. Fackenheim contends, his research, like Mendelsson's, testifies to a genuine tension shaping many non-antisemitic² responses to the debate, which exhibit a profound devotion to the preservation of Judaism as a culture as well as a desire to incorporate that tradition into a broader, universal project.³

Zunz's approach is less incoherent than plangently symptomatic of the constraints built into the very structure of the Jewish Question, which always already poses Judaism as a problem for modernity. George Eliot, who read and admired Zunz, also produced a major contribution to debate on the Jewish Question, represented primarily by her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, and subordinately by the concluding essay in *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" In general, Eliot's relation to Judaism has been faulted for its idealism, but I want to suggest that it is by and large the critiques, and not Eliot's own position, that reproduce the logic whereby Judaism's relation to modernity is too starkly drawn. Terry Eagleton delivers a common verdict on *Daniel Deronda* when he argues that the utopianism of the Jewish plot, with its accompanying ideal of organic totality, disavows the unstable conditions of modernity so vividly depicted in the Gwendolen Harleth plot, with its countervailing emphasis on exchange value, amorality, contingency, and sheer will to power.⁴ In somewhat different terms, Christina Crosby has argued that Eliot's idealistic representation of Judaism ultimately negates the Jews themselves. As she puts it, in order for the Jews to "become the representative historical...



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