Review: Review
Reviewed Work(s): The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature by Anne Henchman
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poetic thought and character, her music not modulated and dynamic enough for the "sense of musical delight," which Coleridge says is a gift of imagination.

Her best poetry, I believe, is in the prose of Maggie Tulliver’s importunate vision and dangerous relaxation, Edward Casaubon’s self-disappointing passion and fearful failure to face death, Dorothea’s vague or precise desires and anguished self-control, Gwendolen Harleth’s dread of the world inside and outside her own imagination, and some of the reticent narrator’s intense moments. Here is where Eliot matches the lyrical, impassioned, and self-generating analysis in poems like Arnold’s "Buried Life."

Poetry takes many forms, and I am not suggesting that Tate should exclude Eliot, only wondering that he doesn’t distinguish her powers from those of his other poets. He shows us new complexities in the Victorians, but I’m not sure what his idea of poetry is or if he thinks it qualitatively different from prose as a medium for psychology.

NOTES
3. My quotations from poems are brief excerpts from Tate’s.


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The scope of the “sidereal clock” (3) in the opening epigraph of Daniel Deronda (hereafter cited as DD) makes the timepiece hard to imagine and to forget. This clock, constructed of the “stars’ unceasing journey” (3), is larger than immense. Its movement can extend beyond a possible beginning to time, a fact that a personified Science in the passage confronts. When he tries to put a finger on a starting point on the clock, the stars do not dissolve in the precise moment of their creation; instead, Science’s finger begins to look strange. It takes on the metaphor of the timepiece, turning into a “clock-finger” (3). The place it selects, meanwhile, undercuts this same metaphor, becoming an abstract “Nought” (3) rather than a clock-constructed twelve o’clock or midnight. The conflict in the epigraph between the material substance
of the heavens and the theoretical goals of science leads to an imagistic strangeness—and an irresolvable tension too. Dusty stars and perfect zeros cannot come together with ease.

This conflict between matter and theory lies at the center of Anna Henchman’s much-needed analysis of astronomy in *Daniel Deronda*, which appears in a thirty-seven-page chapter of *The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature*. Examining *Daniel Deronda* alongside works by Hardy, De Quincey, and Tennyson, Henchman looks at Eliot’s depiction of two human experiences of the skies: the bodily one of looking up at the constellations most familiar to one’s own place on earth, and the theoretical one of escaping the limits of the body through speculations about the movements of—and perspectives from—other planets. She connects these two aspects of experience when analyzing what many of the novel’s astronomical references say about human development. Henchman argues that in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot shows that a more grounded experience of the heavens in childhood is necessary if one wants to gain access to the more freeing, speculative experience of the stars (160).

To support this argument, Henchman draws upon the passage about Gwendolen Harleth’s unstable childhood in which the narrator speaks of how a human life should “be well rooted in some spot of native land” (*DD* 16). The narrator, after saying that an early attachment to home naturally precedes any desire for theoretical engagement, asserts: “The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead” (*DD* 16). Henchman calls this passage “the most explicit account of how the capacities for imagination and abstract thinking develop from the experience of ‘tender’ attachment to a small patch of the world” (160). Her reliance on the passage grows heavy as she uses this argument about cognitive development to bring together many disparate references to astronomy in Eliot’s novel. It, for instance, surfaces to connect Gwendolen’s terror of “the little astronomy taught her at school” (*DD* 52) and Daniel’s, Mordecai’s, and Charisi’s intuitions, shown through their perceptions of the heavens, that “the sky and the starry universe have something profound to teach” (177). (Gwendolen, having missed the rooted stage of development as a child, cannot easily engage in such profound lessons.)

While Henchman’s assertions about this developmental theory are sound, they do not extend beyond what a careful reading of the novel offers. In general, Henchman’s bold choice to take an interdisciplinary approach to Victorian
science and literature turns less self-assured when it comes to her critical treat-
ment of Eliot. She does not go into depth about how Victorian science affects
Daniel Deronda’s representation of astronomy—a surprising omission in light
of both Eliot’s strong engagement with this branch of science and Henchman’s
critical stance throughout the book. In the earliest chapters of The Starry Sky
Within, Henchman explores how Eliot, when young, read astronomer John
Pringle Nichol (50) and, when older, “befriended leading astronomers and
visited observatories,” as both De Quincey and Tennyson did (2), but while
Henchman extensively examines Nichol’s effect on De Quincey’s work and
Victorian ideas of parallax on Tennyson’s, she looks only at how Eliot drew
upon nineteenth-century science in the most general terms. She speaks of how
Eliot “uses spatial language to evoke the relationship between an individual self
and the rest of the universe” (170), but does not explain how Eliot’s strategy
specifically pertained to Victorian astronomy or to any period of the astro-
nomical sciences. As Henchman herself admits about this mode of speaking
of the self—a mode that, as she defines it, includes such terms as “broaden-
ing one’s horizons”—“this spatial language for mental range is part of ordinary
language” (170).

When Henchman does apply historical science to her readings of Eliot’s fic-
tion in specific detail, she tends to move away from Daniel Deronda and Victorian
astronomy. She goes toward Middlemarch to speak about biology and the micro-
scope (183) or toward the famous passage on the “pier-glass” in that same novel
and a geocentricism rooted in ancient astronomy (166–67). At one point when
Henchman does apply mid-nineteenth-century field theories to Eliot’s text, she
provides only a few intriguing sentences about how the science relates to the
fiction. She asserts that Eliot conceives of her characters “in terms of radiating
forces such as gravity and magnetism, rather than through the linear language of
optical placement” (169). But here where the science grows particularly interest-
ing and connects to Eliot’s text, Henchman suddenly cuts short to start a new
section. Field theories are not explored in as much detail as topics less relevant to
Henchman’s study as a whole, such as the connection between geocentricism and
Gwendolen’s egoism—and in this particular case, the unbalanced focus weak-
ens the overall compelling originality of Henchman’s analysis. The connection
between geocentricism and egoism in Eliot’s work notably has been explored

Ultimately, what may have posed the biggest challenge to Henchman is
what makes her retracing of Shuttleworth’s steps noticeable and her own
analysis so needed: the paucity of criticism on astronomy in *Daniel Deronda*, a subject that asks for examination through the novel’s abundant—and often scientifically oriented—references to the stars. Henchman speaks of how few critics have addressed the prevalence of astronomical imagery in *Daniel Deronda*, calling Shuttleworth, who dedicates only three pages to the subject in her book, an “important exception” (164). Henchman has a great deal of material to cover in one chapter and little critical conversation to propel her forward through her textual examples. Her general focus on the development of the capacity for abstract thought is broad enough to address a wide array of quotes: from the description of Daniel’s observations of the sky as he lies on a riverbank in “half-speculative, half-involuntary identification” with what he sees (DD 160) to the epigraph about men like planets having both “a visible and invisible history” (DD 139), which Henchman ties to Daniel’s and Charisi’s shared ability to think objectively (139). She ultimately analyzes Daniel’s capacity to grasp abstractions in terms of the sidereal clock. Speaking of Daniel’s highly developed ability for speculative thought, Henchman states that, early in the novel, this ability keeps him from participating in a more grounded, earthly experience. About his inability to act, Henchman writes: “We can think back here to the astronomer wanting to measure the ‘unceasing journey of the stars’ who must choose an arbitrary zero point—insert himself into the equation—in order to measure anything at all. Daniel is initially paralyzed by his ability to take on a subject position so different from his own” (173).

Henchman enters into a vital analysis of *Daniel Deronda* through her exploration of the novel’s descriptions of its characters’ observations of the skies, the narrator’s assertions about the planets, and the prose’s astronomical imagery. The chapter is quick and sweeping and leaves one wondering along with Henchman about how the novel’s astronomical themes, images, and considerations, represented in their abundance in this engaging chapter, could have evaded thorough examination for so long. Henchman is following where the novel itself is pointing with its unforgettable clock of stars. If, at times, her analysis falls short, it is because the ideas that she uses to break down Eliot’s writing are too broad. Her general treatment of the text leads to a discovery of how Daniel must “insert himself into the equation” after choosing “an arbitrary zero point”—a clear enough conclusion—but Eliot’s singular novel often calls for a focus more pointed, specific, and strange, like that clock-finger pointing out a Nought.
WORKS CITED