The Body and Taboos in George Eliot's Daniel Deronda

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The body, physical relations, and love out of wedlock are the taboo Victorian subjects par excellence. In *Daniel Deronda*, the body is kept at arm's length, or sometimes dealt with obliquely, or its "nobler" parts only are evoked. By XIXth century standards, Daniel's and Mirah's undeclared love for each other cannot but be platonic and chaste, and the young girl's father's suspicion of its being carnal is felt as a degradation and a profanation:

> Meanwhile Lapidoth's presence had raised a new impalpable partition between Deronda and Mirah — each of them dreading the soiling inferences of his mind, each of them interpreting mistakenly the increased reserve and diffidence of the other (67, 670).

When Daniel finally confesses his love to her and she accepts his marriage proposal, the solemn scene that ensues is full of modesty and reserve, but apparently quite devoid of passion, and the only vaguely physical manifestation of love is the brief exchange of a chaste kiss. Yet, judging from the lexical overlapping between love and religion, the scene rather looks as if a pact were being sealed. Besides, Mirah, not Daniel, has the initiative:

> But by degrees the rapturous assurance of unhoped-for good took possession of her frame; her face glowed under Deronda's as he bent over her; yet she looked up still with intense gravity, as when she had first

> acknowledged with religious gratitude that he had thought her "worthy of the best" . . . she could only lift up her lips to his and just kiss them, as if that were the simplest "yes" (68, 679).

For obvious reasons, any mention of physical contact or intercourse is absent from the narrative, although these realities are not absent from the novel, in the form of suggestion, or allusion. As early as the first chapters, the narrator stresses Gwendolen's coldness, which is presented as excessive and almost pathological, as if her refusal and her failure to give and to receive love and tenderness were signs of frigidity. In Chapter 7, Rex's innocent courtship and his passionate homage to Gwendolen introduce a strange metaphor: "The perception that poor Rex wanted to be tender made her curl up and harden like a sea-anemone at the touch of a finger" (66).[1]

Her revulsion explicitly encompasses the emotional or sentimental field, and, in a more implicit and modestly discreet way, that of physical relations. Moreover, her violent sobbing after Rex's mortified departure, and her ability to put up with only her mother's presence close to her, as she herself admits to Mrs Davilow, reveal that Gwendolen's fear verges on the irrational, and goes much beyond the Victorian maid's timidity or bashfulness towards the opposite sex:

> "I shall never love anybody. I can't love people. I hate them."
> "The time will come, dear, the time will come."
> Gwendolen was more and more convulsed with sobbing; but putting her arms round her mother's neck with an almost painful clinging, she said brokenly, "I can't bear anyone to be very near but you" (7, 68).

In Chapter 11, just before her ill-fated meeting with Grandcourt, the narrator makes it clear that males solely interest her as foils for her beauty, whose admiring glances and attentions flatter her and reassure her about her vulnerable ego:

> Mrs Vulcany once remarked that Miss Harleth was too fond of the gentlemen; but we know that she was not in the least fond of them —

[1] The edition used is the 1988 *World's Classics* paperback.

> she was only fond of their homage — and women did not give her homage (11, 95).

It is quite significant that Gwendolen's body should hardly ever be presented whole. The descriptions of it are always full of decency, in accordance with the rules of taste and moral conventions of the Victorian period. The novel only emphasises some details or some specific elements which were regarded as safe, innocent, and/or noble, such as the eyes, the hair and the hairdo, the hands, the face as a whole, the figure, or overall appearance. Consequently, during the scene at the casino in Leubronn, the reader learns from the conversation of some young men admiring Gwendolen that she has a turned-up nose, a beautiful mouth, a pale complexion, and narrow, slanting eyes. In Chapter 11, the portrait in the Reynolds style brings some further information on her charm and elegance while remaining rather vague and general:

> . . . the simplicity of her white cashmere with its border of pale green set off her form to the utmost. A thin line of gold round her neck, and the gold star on her breast, were her only ornaments. Her smooth soft hair piled up into a grand crown made a clear line about her brow. Sir Joshua would have been glad to take her portrait (96).

The descriptions of Gwendolen's beauty never connote sensuality; they mainly lay stress on purely aesthetic qualities that seem to be disembodied. In Chapter 1, during the casino scene, she is presented as a goddess — a sylph or a nereid — or a serpent-woman clad in green, like a kind of latter-day Lamia. These ambiguous, untouchable femme fatale characteristics are repeatedly shown throughout the novel. The image of a bewitching deity or enchantress is taken up again early in Chapter 10, when Gwendolen, flanked by the young ladies of the neighbourhood, is compared to Calypso and her nymphs. That she should appear to so much advantage at the archery contest in Chapters 10 and 11 is obviously not the result of pure chance — she is cast as Diana the huntress, the archetype of amorous coldness. This coincides with the precise moment when she first meets Grandcourt.

Paradoxically, for all her cold aloofness, she is depicted as an enchantress, gifted with a great fascination and appeal, and arousing men's admiration and/or love, as is the case for Rex, Mr Middleton, Daniel (early in the novel), Hans Meyrick, Grandcourt, together with other unnamed characters. In a roundabout way, Hans Meyrick ironically compares her to Lucrezia Borgia in Chapter 45. Needless to say, this does not point to any ardour or hot-blooded streak in her, but it is the implied suggestion of her murderous impulses towards Grandcourt, the more so as the Borgias were quite notorious in this respect. Gwendolen shares many traits with the *Belle Dame sans Merci*. Because of her, Rex lives through the torments of unrequited love, and briefly languishes; and she is indirectly responsible for her own husband's death.

Her pallor is first evoked during a brief anonymous conversation at the casino:

> ". . . Woman was tempted by a serpent: why not man?"
> "She is certainly very graceful. But she wants a tinge of colour in her cheeks: it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has" (7).

This selfsame lack of vitality is humorously — and ominously — emphasised in free indirect speech, rendering the exchange of remarks and impressions between the villagers watching Gwendolen's wedding in Chapter 31:

> . . . as to face, perhaps it might be thought that a title required something more rosy; but the bridegroom himself not being fresh-coloured — being indeed, as the miller's wife observed, very much of her own husband's complexion — the match was the more complete (298).

Moreover, Gwendolen appears statue-like, and the word "warm" is nullified by the evocative power of the term "marble" which clearly alludes to her sentimental and physical frigidity:

> Dressed in black without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try

> again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white and tawny marble (23, 214).

The Grandcourts sauntering along the harbour in Genoa are also perceived as living, or moving, statues by a group of Italian onlookers:

> This handsome, fair-skinned English couple . . . both of them proud, pale, and calm, without a smile on their faces . . . it was a thing to go out and see . . . and the wife was declared to be like a statue (54, 583).

The emphasis on the couple's pallor and coldness first has a dramatic purpose: it is a foreshadowing of Grandcourt's death. But it also helps to create psychological delineation. Thus, it enables the narrator, cunningly transgressing the Victorian taboos on love and the body, to obliquely suggest the absence of any passion or perhaps any physical relations between Grandcourt and his wife. As a matter of fact, Gwendolen is always dressed in the same colours — white, green, or black[2] — which either symbolise virginal purity, or death, in the literal and metaphoric sense.

In Chapter 11, when she meets her future husband during the archery contest at the Brackenshaws', Gwendolen is represented as a Diana, a fatal beauty, or an Amazon with her bow and arrows. But Grandcourt himself is the very opposite of vitality, or even of virility as the term "actress" testifies to:

> . . . it was perhaps not possible for a breathing man wide awake to look less animated . . . His complexion had that faded fairness resembling that of an actress when bare of the artificial white and red; his long narrow eyes expressed nothing but indifference (11, 91).

Indeed, there is no hint of sensuality, neither is there anything aggressive in his courtship of Gwendolen in Chapters 26 and 27, as

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[2] Respectively in Chapter 11, 96, and in Chapter 56, 590; in Chapter 1; in Chapter 23, 214, and in Chapter 48, 520.

Grandcourt seems to be incapable of showing any signs of passion. But he is also too clear-sighted, and too clever not to know that only this bloodless, overcivilised behaviour will bring her round to accepting his marriage proposal:

> But he did at length lay down his hat and advance to take her hand, just pressing his lips upon it and letting it go again. She thought his behaviour perfect, and gained a sense of freedom which made her almost ready to be mischievous (27, 257).
>
> She thought his manners as a lover more agreeable than any she had seen described. She had no alarm lest he meant to kiss her (258).

In quite a veiled and shadowy way, the only implicitly sexual innuendo in this sexless courtship is Grandcourt's sadistic desire to tame the woman he wants to marry. The vocabulary used to describe "this pleasure in mastering reluctance" connotes perversion and perverseness:

> She had been brought to accept him in spite of everything — brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while. On the whole, Grandcourt got more pleasure out of this notion than he could have done out of winning a girl of whom he was sure that she had a strong inclination for him personally. In any case she would have to submit . . . He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him (28, 269-70).

No physical relations or intercourse are mentioned or even suggested between Grandcourt and his wife, as if their marriage had been left unconsummated. And yet, the possibility of a pregnancy or of procreation frightens and revolts Gwendolen, though we are left in the dark as to what type of vision this notion conjures up in her mind:

> She was reduced to dread lest she should become a mother. It was not the image of a new sweetly-budding life that came as a vision of deliverance from the monotony of distaste: it was an image of another sort (54, 576).

The marriage bearing no fruit does not indicate any impotence on Grandcourt's part, as the narrative discloses his former affair with Mrs Glasher, for instance in Chapters 14, 30, 31, and 48. And we learn he fathered four beautiful children. Mentioning the affair whose illegitimate nature is so explicitly stated — the four children giving undeniable material evidence — and investing it with such dramatic and psychological significance was rather revolutionary, and can be viewed as a breakthrough in Victorian literature.

Gwendolen's horror on discovering the existence of Lydia Glasher in Chapter 14 probably results not so much from her moral indignation at the illegitimate relationship as from her sudden realization of Grandcourt's bodily presence and reality, seen as obtrusive and threatening. Her rival's sensual beauty and her children are a reminder of the price to pay if she wants to marry: "Gwendolen, watching Mrs Glasher's face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream" (128).

Mrs Glasher is the main obstacle to Grandcourt's marriage, and a parallel could be drawn between the "mad woman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre* and the one in *Daniel Deronda*. As a matter of fact, seeing how intractable she could be about the diamonds, Grandcourt "had a baffling sense that he had to deal with something like madness" (30, 297). It is no coincidence if the streak of madness in her coexists with what is indirectly shown as her ardent, passionate temper, as is quite appropriately connoted by her black hair and eyes:

> An impressive woman, whom many would turn to look at again in passing; her figure was slim and sufficiently tall, her face rather emaciated, so that its sculpturesque beauty was the more pronounced, her crisp hair perfectly black, and her large anxious eyes also what we call black. Her dress was soberly correct, her age perhaps physically more advanced than the number of years would imply, but hardly less than seven-and-thirty (13, 121).

She is the only character in the novel openly endowed with sexual vitality and appeal, but in accordance with Victorian taboos, she is also bound to be potentially dangerous, destructive, and evil. Her

faded beauty — evoked again as that of someone "who must once have been exceedingly handsome," in Chapter 14 — is akin to that of a sorceress or a Medusa. As early as Chapter 31, her vindictive letter to Gwendolen accompanying the diamonds is compared to an "adder" lying on the jewel-case, slowly distilling its poison into the addressee's mind and heart, and turning the diamonds into "poisoned gems" (302-03).

Mrs Glasher takes her revenge for the last time by showing herself on purpose in London, at the exact spot — aptly named "Rotten Row" — she knows Gwendolen and Grandcourt will ride past. The scene also rests on the serpent imagery:

> but she could not let her discretion go entirely without the reward of making a Medusa-apparition before Gwendolen, vindictiveness and jealousy finding relief in an outlet of venom, though it were as futile as that of a viper already flung to the other side of the hedge (48, 517).

Grandcourt himself gradually comes to be the incarnation of evil in Gwendolen's eyes, and like his former mistress, he is closely associated with serpent images. The reptile has sexual and biblical overtones and it symbolises temptation, sin, and evil. In the first weeks of their married life, when Gwendolen first becomes aware of her husband's true self, and realizes she is the helpless victim of domestic tyranny, she compares Grandcourt to a boa relentlessly stifling its prey (35, 363). Moreover, her reading the "venomous" letter in Chapter 31 marks the beginning of "her husband's empire of fear" (35, 364). The description of his baleful influence reaches a climax during the yachting tour in the Mediterranean:

> quarrelling with Grandcourt was impossible: she might have well have made angry remarks to a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation (54, 575).

The serpent stands for a world of perverted moral values in which love itself comes to be viewed as a mercenary activity, a commodity money can buy. The following passage clearly indicates the

extent of Gwendolen's fall, as she had to perjure herself to obtain power, wealth, and titles, and had to sell herself, body and soul, to Grandcourt the tempter, as if prostituting herself or signing a pact with the devil:

> he had won her by the rank and luxuries he had to give her, and these she had got: he had fulfilled his side of the contract . . . the husband to whom she felt that she had sold herself . . . the husband to whom she had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence, collared and dragged behind him to witness what he would, without remonstrance (54, 573).

The body metaphor, although it belongs to a taboo preserve, paradoxically describes the moral sphere, as if by contagion, by making the way Gwendolen was dealt with into a kind of violation, if not moral "rape."

Besides, the emphasis on the exclusively platonic quality of the relations between Gwendolen and Daniel sounds so insistent and excessive that it arouses suspicion. At times, the narrator sounds as if he/she were doing his/her utmost to vindicate the moral soundness of his/her story, by forestalling possible reservations or criticisms from prudish or overscrupulous readers.

In fact, Daniel is seduced by Gwendolen's attractive physique before she gets married, as stated unambiguously in Chapter 28:

> But in the movement which had led him to redeem Gwendolen's necklace for her, and which was at work in him still, there was something beyond his usual compassionate fervour — something due to the fascination of her womanhood. He was very open to that sort of charm (273).

But this attraction to the young woman is not consciously sexual and is gradually turned into a form of intellectual curiosity, together with compassion, and the desire to bring her some moral support. The relations between Gwendolen and Daniel gradually shift from the sentimental or amorous sphere to the ethic and religious plane. From Chapter 35 onwards, Daniel plays the part of a priest, a father,

and a mentor or a moral guide, whereas she is cast as his disciple, his child, or the lost sheep:

> If she cried towards him, what then? She cried as the child cries whose little feet have fallen backwards — cried to be taken by the hand, lest she should lose herself (65, 660).

The child image frequently describes Mirah as well, as if the narrator, in keeping with Daniel's way of considering her, were trying to rid her of her seductiveness and her feminine attributes which Hans Meyrick does not fail to notice when he declares he wants to paint her as Berenice. For him, Jewish Italian women in Rome are paragons of beauty (37, 391-93). In fact, comparing Mirah to a child or a small harmless animal — a fawn or a little bird — is like an attempt to make her less sensuous than her association with Italy and the mention of her thick, black hair could suggest she really is.

Platonic or sexless relations in the novel mirror the restraints of Victorian morality, and the fears aroused by the body.

Besides, Daniel has an indispensable role in the novel, as a saviour, a spiritual guide, and a future Zionist leader. And because of this higher status and mission, the narrator literally denies the "hero" any physical attraction, going to great lengths to ennoble and poeticise — thus, in other words, disguising or distorting — what he feels when he first sees Gwendolen or Mirah.

When Mirah is about to drown herself in the Thames, and is first seen by Daniel whose vision, as if sanitised by the narrator, gives the scene its own colouring, she rather resembles a little girl or an abstraction, than a real adult woman, because she is an embodiment of "delicate, childlike beauty." It was indispensable to purify his attraction to her, and to turn it into tender compassion or aesthetic admiration. The words used all create the desired effect: Daniel views Mirah as an impersonation of misery, and she is "a girl hardly more than eighteen, of low slim figure, with most delicate little face" (17, 159). Moreover, her motionless despair is "statue-like," and she looks like "a fawn or

other gentle animal before it turns to run away." From the start, the visual or pictorial quality in the descriptions of Mirah largely dominates, and she is more reminiscent of an "image," or a small valuable jewel than of a flesh and blood creature. Of course, she is far from being "ugly and vulgar" in spite of her dire poverty, and the "attractiveness of the image" lingers in Daniel's mind, as sharply defined as an "onyx cameo" (159-60).

In fact, the reader comes to think the narrator is overdoing it, partly deliberately, partly unintentionally, no doubt. The very numerous emotional words and the repeated use of the adjectives "small," or "little," and of the word "child," aim at correcting the "bad" impression that Mirah's dark, long-lashed eyes, and gorgeous hair might give. But the narrative makes her into too perfect and at times too disembodied a being for her to be life-like and probable. The following prettified portrait of Mirah, gives evidence of the narrator's attempt to erase her sensual side:

> she took everything as quietly as if she had been a child going to breakfast. . . . imagine her with her dark hair brushed from her temples, but yet showing certain tiny rings there . . . the mass of it hanging behind just to the nape of the little neck in curly fibres. . . . Then see the perfect cameo her profile makes . . . a gem-like darkness for the eye and eyebrow; the delicate nostrils defined enough to be ready for sensitive movements (32, 314).

Even though she is also compared to Queen Budoor of the *Arabian Nights* in Chapter 20 — the overtones of sensuous refinement and luxury are unmistakable — the remaining impression is that left by the child and small animal imagery which occasionally verge on the ludicrous for modern ears, as when Mirah marvels at her luck in being welcomed by the Meyricks like "a poor little bird, that was lost and could not fly, was taken and put into a warm nest where there was a mother and sisters" (32, 312).

Still, Mirah has a stronger physical reality and presence, and greater needs than either her brother, the Meyricks, or Daniel seem to

suspect. Her jealousy of Gwendolen is not only confined to the affective or purely sentimental plane; it also has repercussions on her body, causing her to feel acute physical pain. The shift from psychological to physical might be a way of making it obliquely understood that, although she may not be fully aware of it, Mirah's love for Daniel is strongly sensuous, as is also suggested in confirmation by the snake metaphor:

> But her feeling was no longer vague: the cause of her pain — the image of Mrs Grandcourt by Deronda's side drawing him farther and farther into the distance, was as definite as pincers on her flesh (61, 627-28).
>
> And the thought of any close confidence between them stirred the little biting snake that had long lain curled and harmless in Mirah's bosom (63, 645).

Love and desire, hardly ever mentioned as a rule, are only conceivable and respectable in their married version, so that Grandcourt's affair with Mrs Glasher can be regarded as a perversion or a warping of this matrimonial ethics. The phrase "left-handed marriage" (64,649) to refer to the illegitimate relation leaves no room for doubt as to the Victorians' standpoint on the matter. The left has sinister undertones and is here closely paralleled with immorality. In fact, two sets of standards prevail and are sometimes opposed throughout the novel: those of George Eliot herself who, as a progressive and liberal thinker, chose to show an unconventional love affair[3] — something unprecedented in Victorian fiction which it is useless to expatiate on[4] — and those of the strait-laced characters of the novel whose conventional morality is frequently voiced by the narrator in the free indirect speech.

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[3] George Eliot herself and George Henry Lewes lived as man and wife because he could not get a divorce and marry her.

[4] *Daniel Deronda* is not the only novel in which illegitimate relations are evoked; *Adam Bede*, by George Eliot, is another case in point, but it shows a short-lived affair resting on seduction and social inequality — as in Moore's *Esther Waters*, or Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* — not a long-standing relationship rooted in both partners' reciprocated love. Moreover, Mrs Glasher was already married when she met, fell in love and eloped with, Grandcourt.

Moreover, moral judgements on male and female conduct rest on different criteria, which are also dependent on social status. Indeed, Grandcourt can easily be forgiven for his past "mistake" on account of his being both a man and an aristocrat. By Mr Gascoigne's standards, such a lenient view of the matter would be unacceptable if its object were a more vulgar man with fewer social privileges:

> if his male acquaintances had gossiped in his hearing, he was not disposed to . . . give it any emphasis. . . . He held it futile . . . to show any curiosity as to the past of a young man whose birth, wealth, and consequent leisure made many habits venial which under other circumstances would have been inexcusable . . . and we can hardly pronounce him singular in feeling that a landed proprietor with a mixture of noble blood in his veins was not to be an object of suspicious inquiry like a reformed character who offers himself as your butler or footman (8, 77).

The use of the first person plural pointing to some form of intimacy and to some community of feeling between the character — as a mouthpiece of his times, and of the genteel Wessex society he lives in — the narrator, and the reader, is only a smoke screen hiding the ferocious irony underlying the description of these changeable moral boundaries. Of course, criticising the nobility is just another taboo in this secluded, conservative, snobbish Wessex spot, but this sounds all the more ironic as Mr Gascoigne is a clergyman. His view of an eligible bachelor as someone with enough wealth and rank to compensate for possible past breaches of the moral laws (inexcusable in a woman, as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* cruelly proves) was widespread enough to be representative of Victorian class and sex prejudices:

> . . . aristocratic heirship resembled regal heirship in excepting its possessor from the ordinary standard of moral judgements. Grandcourt, the almost certain baronet . . . was a match to be accepted on broad general grounds . . . with reference to higher views, repentance had a supreme moral and religious value. There was every reason to believe that any woman of well-regulated mind would be happy with Grandcourt (13, 117-18).

But it was deemed unnecessary, ill-advised, if not harmful, for a woman to know about her future husband's past. Mr Gascoigne's blindness, and ignorance of the extent of Gwendolen's awareness of the situation amply proves the point:

> For the good Rector had an innocent conviction that his niece was unaware of Mrs Glasher's existence, arguing with masculine soundness from what maidens and wives were likely to know, do, and suffer (64, 649).

This necessary ignorance on women's part was another deep-rooted taboo which accounts for Gwendolen's moral suffering being all the more intense. Her foreknowledge before marrying Grandcourt is truly poisonous because it is not only a violation of Victorian taboos, but also a moral taint.

Illegitimate affairs were condoned for men; what's more, they were mildly entertaining, like the adult version of adolescent escapades. But in spite of his indulgent views on Grandcourt's responsibility, Mr Gascoigne's concern about morality suddenly wakes up when Mrs Glasher's position is publicly and unduly acknowledged by her former lover's will, as if she were more to blame than him, and morality were exclusively reserved for women:

> The effect is painful in more ways than one. Female morality is likely to suffer from this marked advantage and prominence being given to illegitimate offspring (64, 648).

Mirah also behaves in accordance with what was expected from Victorian women when, looking back in horror and disgust, she tells Mrs Meyrick about the Count's assiduous courtship. As a matter of fact, he shares certain traits with Grandcourt, as if immorality could be represented in a single, almost archetypal way:

> The Count was neither very young nor very old: his hair and eyes were pale; he was tall and walked heavily, and his face was heavy and grave except when he looked at me. He smiled at me, and his smile went

> through me with horror: I could not tell why he was so much worse to me than other men. (20, 186).

Of course, Mirah runs away from him, and is rescued by Daniel; so is Gwendolen, saved from Grandcourt's taint and satanic power by the same priest-like man. By a final irony, although George Eliot's sentimental life was unconventional, and she turned away from the orthodox faith of her youth, becoming an agnostic, her last novel — as both a critical portrait of the Victorian era, and an unintentional reflection of the writer's unconscious world — is quite remarkable for its distrustful, fearful approach to the body, and the way in which it implicitly, and presumably unconsciously, rejects physical relations as grossly impure. *Daniel Deronda* is a novel of taboos in which the Christian perspective paradoxically triumphs.

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