Consumptive Bodies and Diaphanous Types: The Vanishing Self in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*

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Abstract
This article aims to show that the pervasive presence of consumption in 19th-century imagination can be used to work across the different cultures of science and medicine in order to bridge the gap between George Eliot's and Walter Pater's writings. By focusing on the special relation consumption holds with both medicine's visual turn and with the self-effacement required by scientific epistemology, the article discusses the relevance of consumptive bodies to the realist project. While science's desire to make the invisible visible results in a fascination with the complete transparency of the self, literary texts like Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* use figures of consumptives as 'diaphanous types' that, as in Pater's theorisation, both evoke and resist the transparency of the vanishing self. Beyond the ideological and stylistic differences of Eliot's and Pater's texts, the article demonstrates that both authors reveal awareness of the aesthetical and moral value of receptivity and of the refinement and pathology associated with the vanishing self.

Keywords: consumption in literature, diaphanous, vanishing self.

Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say?
W. B. Yeats

1. Bridging Gaps

Finding the names of George Eliot and Walter Pater in the same title is fairly unusual. Despite U.C. Knoepflmacher's important 1965 study, which saw Eliot and Pater as authors engaged in the construction of a similar ideal of "religious humanism" (Knoepflmacher 1965: 19), the two writers are generally believed to belong to incompatible and mutually-exclusive literary worlds. Eliot's belief that all art should have a pre-eminently moral role would seem to offer a stark contrast

to the famous motto 'art for art's sake', which is frequently used as shorthand for Aestheticism. Similarly, Eliot's commitment to realist fiction would appear to be distant from Pater's writings, in which classicism, philosophical ideas and the visual arts converge to create a highly idiosyncratic style. Moreover, it is fairly well-known that Eliot probably did not like Pater, describing his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), shortly after publication, as "poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life" (quoted in Pater [1893] 1980: 446); Pater, on the other hand, both praised and criticised Eliot's work in private conversations and unpublished or minor writings, but never quoted or reviewed her in his major writings[1].

And yet, if we step beyond the common assumptions about Eliot's moralism and Pater's aestheticism, we may find that, as Thomas Albrecht puts it, "Pater's allegedly amoral writings are unexpectedly close to Eliot's critical spirit" (Albrecht 2018: 105). In this article I would like to show how working across the two different cultures of science and literature may provide an apt lens from which to demystify the supposedly neat separation between Eliot's and Pater's works. In particular, I will argue that a close look at figures of consumptives in Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and in Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887-1893)[2] reveals how these bodies act as diaphanous types that problematise realism and can effectively bridge the gap between Eliot's and Pater's writings.

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[1] Pater praises Eliot's *Romola* in the 1864 paper "Diaphaneitè" (unpublished in his lifetime) and in an 1888 review of Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsemere*; on the other hand, his biographers Thomas Wright and A.C. Benson report private conversations in which Pater spoke less admiringly of Eliot's skills as a writer (Albrecht 2018: 104).

[2] In this article, unless otherwise stated, I consider as *Imaginary Portraits* the nine portraits collected by Lene Østermark-Johansen in her 2014 edition (Pater [1887] 2014), though Pater's volume of the same title, published in 1887, included only four portraits: "A Prince of Court Painters", "Denys l'Auxerrois", "Sebastian van Storck" and "Duke Carl of Rosenmold". When citing chapters not originally included in the 1887 volume, the figure in square brackets refers to the first date of publication of the chapter.

2. The Consumptive Body: The Medical Gaze and Scientific Epistemology

The pervasive presence of TB or 'consumption'[3] in the 19th-century imagination has in recent years inspired considerable scholarly work. Starting from Susan Sontag's 1978 intuition that "TB takes on qualities assigned to the lungs, which are part of the upper, spiritualised body" (Sontag 1978: 17), consumption has been studied especially for its representation as a Romantic and 'fashionable' disease (Lawlor 2006), refining patients and conferring to them (especially to women) a "tubercular aesthetics" (Byrne 2011: 96ff) which had an impact also on the fashion industry (Day 2017).

Beside its refining action, 19th-century consumption becomes an especially interesting disease also because it arguably holds a special relation to the insistence on vision and transparent-like representation that is typical of the realist project. Medical inquiry on consumption both testifies to, and in turn helps strengthen, the medical desire to 'see everything' in the body, which forms a characteristic trait of 19th-century medicine, as Michel Foucault's classic study *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) has amply shown. The stethoscope, invented in 1816, is the emblem of medicine's 'visual turn': though used in the auditory practice of mediated auscultation, this diagnostic tool ideally transforms the doctor's ear into an eye that really 'looks at the chest', as the etymology of the term reminds us. Trained by the visual clarity provided by the corpse in anatomical dissection, the doctor who listens to the sounds coming from the patient's invisible inner organs aims at mapping out visually the spatial as well as the temporal extension of the disease in the living body.

The consumptive body proves an especially apt one when it comes to demonstrating the power of the medical gaze to make the invisible visible. By using the sounds of pectoriloquy as clues leading to the detection of a mystery, the doctor makes the body transparent by locating the tubercle, the invisible secret brought to

[3] The vernacular 'consumption' was the common term used for TB throughout the 19th century. Although the term 'tuberculosis' was deployed also in the earlier 19th century by some medical doctors (for example, by Henry Ancell in 1852), it began to be widely deployed only after 1882, when Robert Koch discovered *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and demonstrated that it was the pathogen causing the disease.

light by medical science. The 'secret' consumption reveals is also, ultimately, death itself, actualised in the lesions of the organs. The strange visibility of death's advancement in the body grants medical knowledge as well as meaning for the individual life. In the 19th century "the privilege of the consumptive", Foucault writes, is that "death becomes constitutive of singularity" (Foucault [1963] 2003: 171), conferring truth and individuality to subjectivity:

> in the slow, half-subterranean, but already visible approach of death, the dull, common life becomes an individuality at last; […] a man, in becoming tubercular, in the fever that hastens things and betrays them, fulfils his incommunicable secret. (pp. 171f)

The visibility of death in the body and its power to confer singularity to the individual life become important tenets of the cultural representation of consumption: for example, when Philippe Ariès famously defines the 19th century "the age of beautiful death", he relies heavily on literary narratives and documentary materials that deal with consumption (Ariès [1977] 1981: 409ff). Countless death-bed descriptions of consumptives in novels and in medical case studies foreground, almost invariably, the sufferer's acquisition of beauty or of insights previously unavailable to them, thus testifying to the existence of a powerful narrative that paradoxically requires the vanishing of the self for the attainment of a special individuality. George Levine has studied how a similar narrative, which he aptly summarises with the phrase "dying to know" (Levine 2002: 2f), lies at the heart of scientific epistemology. Strongly affecting 19th-century British realism, this narrative is founded on the necessity that the inquiring subject should be effaced from writing in order to attain knowledge. Vanishing and self-sacrifice are aimed at the superior goal of scientific accuracy and advancement, and result in the construction of a superior form of self. Consumption appears to enact this narrative, offering a literal interpretation of the metaphorical 'death' of the inquiring subject, realised in scientific epistemology through the self-sacrifice of the human senses and through morally ennobling self-restraint and self-effacement.

What both the medical obsession with 'seeing' and scientific epistemology have in common is, ultimately, the possibility to

observe the liminal moment when life and death, individual subjectivity and objective impersonality can be found together and made the object of transparent representation. Consumption is a privileged standpoint from which to view this process: in this "dread disease", as Dickens famously writes, "death and life are so strangely blended, that death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death" (Dickens [1839] 1999: 601).

As the above quote suggests, however, observing death in life is an experience in which spiritualisation appears inseparable from spectralisation, making the body ethereal but also ghostly. While medicine and scientific discourse desire a body whose flesh vanishes so as to grant absolute visibility and objectivity, in the literary imagination the consumptive body turns 'diaphanous' to emphasise and resist the allure and dangers of transparency.

3. The Diaphanous Type: Between Visibility and Invisibility

Pater's "Diaphaneitè", which he read in 1864 to an undergraduate club in Oxford and which he probably never intended for publication, is a "quarry" (Østermark-Johansen 2014: 14) from which Pater would repeatedly draw inspiration throughout his later writings. The diaphanous type that is the subject of this enigmatically-titled essay (Conlon 1980; Varty 1991) is sketched out vaguely in the text, in an evocative rather than descriptive way. An ideal type, associated to "the regeneration of the world" (Pater [1895] 2014: 82), this character is notable for his rarity and exceptional nature. What distinguishes the diaphanous type from other admirable if more ordinary types like the saint, the philosopher and the artist is on the one hand his extraordinary refinement and, on the other, his effortless simplicity. Both qualities, I would argue, partake in the fascination with the noble vanishing of the self to be found in the representation of consumption in 19th-century imagination.

The refinement of the diaphanous type is the result of a process of gradual erosion of grosser matter: "it is that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point" (p. 77). Forerunning both the controversial invitation "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame" (Pater [1873] 2010: 120) in the "Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of*

the Renaissance and Pater's conception of art as "the removal of surplusage" (Pater [1888] 1910: 19), "Diaphaneitè" outlines a character who takes up the challenge of annihilation for the sake of a greater goal. Like "a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien atmosphere" (Pater [1895] 2014: 80), the diaphanous appears precious and vulnerable, a gifted and a doomed self, whose sacrificial role as "human victim" (p. 82) seems the necessary price to pay for the regeneration of both himself and others. Like the consumptive on his deathbed, he receives meaning and authenticity while on the point of vanishing.

The diaphanous type's graceful simplicity, on the other hand, both evokes and demystifies the transparency of the consumptive body in scientific discourse. Scholars have noted that Pater's essay "stresses transparency in conjunction with invisibility" (Adams 2002: 4) and brings together "opacity and transparency, solidity and evanescence" (Østermark-Johansen 2014: 17). On the one hand, while he refines himself, the diaphanous becomes transparent through a process of cleansing and purification. As the boundaries separating him from the outer world become thinner, he acquires the "entire transparency of nature that lets through unconsciously all that is really lifegiving" (Pater [1895] 2014: 80). Receptivity, however, works both outwardly and inwardly, allowing the diaphanous character to receive impressions from the outside but also to project with clarity the expression of his inward world. As a result, the diaphanous reflects and at the same time emanates light: placed "at the borders of vision" (Maxwell 2005: 75), he can be passive or active, open or impenetrable to the observer's gaze, receptive or projective. Becoming transparent does not entail simply disappearing, but also expressing oneself to the fullest.

Transparent and opaque, evanescent and refulgent, the diaphanous grows thick as he wastes away, defying stable categories and problematising received assumptions about vision and visibility. It is a potential type, open to multifaceted and heterogeneous possibilities for actualisation. Although the ideal embodiment of the diaphanous type is in a healthy frame – as in Raphael, Winckelmann and Goethe, "the diaphanous triumvirate" (Varty 1991: 212) – this character's ethereal nature conjoins the spirituality and spectrality that haunt the cultural representation of 19th-century consumptives.

4. Consumptive Bodies and Diaphanous Types in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*

At first glance Eliot's last novel and Pater's fictional portraits might not seem to have much in common. And yet, both works have struck readers for their ghostly, strangely evanescent quality. Thus, Henry James argues that the "Jewish part" of *Daniel Deronda* "is not embodied" (James 1894: 85), while the eponymous hero has been described as "fleshless and ethereal" (Knoepflmacher 1965: 147) and as a "ghostly disembodiment" (Novak 2008: 33). Similarly, after the publication in book form of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, Arthur Symons writes that Pater "has not been able, or has not wished, to endow them with flesh and blood, with breath of life" (quoted in Østermark-Johansen 2014: 5).

The evanescent narrative of Eliot's and Pater's texts arguably derives from the presence of some consumptive bodies who function as diaphanous types. Although it would be impossible to argue that George Eliot knew "Diaphaneitè", in 1876 she had certainly read Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, where his ideas about the diaphanous type found embodiment. In *Daniel Deronda*, the Jewish prophet-like character of Ezra Mordecai is the most obvious example of a consumptive, but I would argue that also the protagonist Deronda appears as a diaphanous type.

Eliot's and Pater's texts explore questions related to the noble vanishing of the self and the transparency that derives from this act; also, they engage with the problematic agency that emerges out of the transparent self. In *Daniel Deronda*, the appeal of self-effacement is to be found especially in its relation to receptivity: in order to develop sympathetic understanding, the self needs to vanish, at least momentarily, as happens when Deronda famously experiments with "how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape" (Eliot [1876] 1998: 160). *Daniel Deronda* is a novel that centres on the protagonist's "many-sided sympathy" (p. 307), showing that beside its moral function it can also have a paralysing action. If a degree of openness of the self is necessary to achieve "the stamp of rarity" (p. 151) that makes Deronda close to the diaphanous type, much of Deronda's *Bildung* is devoted to the protection of his self from the exposure to the claims of the people

(most notably, Gwendolen and Mordecai) appealing to him for help.

The other vanishing self of the novel is Mordecai, whose individual boundaries become thinner and looser because of consumption, making him open to visions and prophecies. As his body becomes transparent, the novel stages a conception of receptivity that, as in "Diaphaneitè", is both passive and active, involving the reception of external impressions as well as the projection of inward light. While Mordecai struggles with physical weakness, his visions are "the creators and feeders of the world" (p. 436), and his imaginative power makes him akin to a prophet (p. 326), a poet (p. 411) and an experimenter (p. 422). In one of his first conversations with the consumptive Jew, Deronda perceives "a sense of solemnity which seem[s] a radiation from Mordecai" (p. 424): like the diaphanous, Mordecai is refulgent with the light of his prophetic inward visions, less transparent than "opaque to his society and to the reader" (Levine 2002: 198f).

After the introduction of Mordecai, the narrative also becomes diaphanous, inserting a ghostly element into the heart of the realist project. As Peter Brooks puts it, while Gwendolen's story fully explores "the visual logic of the realist tradition" (Brooks 2005: 105), in the Jewish part "the visual is discounted in favour of voice", replacing "representation" with "revelation" and leading the novel "into the unrepresentable" (p. 106). The receptivity of the diaphanous type makes the transparent representation of realist fiction become thick: with Mordecai's prophetic clairvoyance, of course, but also with Deronda's many intuitions and presentiments[4]. Abandoning the combination of "clinical realism" and sympathy to be found in her earlier fiction (Kennedy 2010: 138ff), in the Jewish part of *Daniel Deronda* Eliot deploys Turneresque scenery to dismiss empiricism and explore instead the power of prophetic thinking (Kravetz 2018: 85ff).

Both Eliot and Pater show that the vanishing of the self is an ambivalent value, suspended between spiritualisation and

[4] Also Gwendolen's (Gothic) visions of the future make the narrative ghostly; however, the young woman's clairvoyance is the result of a form of receptivity that is more pathological and disruptive than Deronda's or Mordecai's (Thurschwell 2004).

spectralisation, refinement and pathology. In *Daniel Deronda*, the refinement of Mordecai's consumptive body is ultimately prevented from having the full agency necessary for heroic action. For all its refining action, consumption also makes Mordecai's organism look "threadbare" (Eliot [1876] 1998: 339), wearing out his strength. Deronda, on the other hand, tempers the refinement he has inherited by Jewish ancestry[5] with a sound English breeding and education. This allows him to embody the long sought-for type of Mordecai's visions: "he must be a Jew, intellectually cultured, morally fervid […]; but his face and frame must be beautiful and strong" (p. 405). In other words, Deronda is sympathetic but not weak, melancholy but not morbid: his organism, "rich in youthful health, and with a forcible masculine gravity" (p. 425), embodies "the combination of refinement with force" (p. 158) and makes "a splendid contrast with all that [is] sickly and puling" (p. 157).

Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* also bear awareness of the potentially pathological implications of the refined body. Indeed, the unfinished portrait "An English Poet" even seems to suggest, like *Daniel Deronda*, that an English education may effectively correct the excesses of sophisticated refinement. The son of a Frenchman and an English (consumptive) mother, the protagonist is brought up in Cumberland, where he develops "a kind of intellectual voluptuousness" founded on "hard firm-set diligence" (Pater [1931] 2014: 111). His poetical taste for "flowers in metal", made of "elastic force in word and phrase, following tender delicate thought or feeling" (p. 105) mirrors not only his organic constitution but also the strength/sweetness dichotomy to be found throughout Pater's oeuvre (Østermark-Johansen 2014: 28). And yet, his English upbringing is ultimately not enough to ward off the pathology of refinement. Indeed, the consumption that has already attacked his body has been caused by the English climate as well as "by that long tension of spirit to which the distinction of his intellectual quality was due" (p. 112).

In "Sebastian van Storck", the pathology of refinement is further explored through the focus on the consumptive body. Rather

[5] Although the connection between the Jewish body and refinement might seem surprising, in the late 19th century degeneration is sometimes to be found together with excessively sophisticated and refined organisms, as evidenced in some cases of hysteria or neurasthenia (Perletti 2012).

interestingly, Pater evokes in this text the figure of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose reassessment in Victorian culture relies on a renewed interest in his life (Andrews 2018: 206) and also, I would argue, in the consumption the philosopher suffered from. Spinoza, to whom Mordecai is also explicitly compared (Eliot [1876] 1998: 404), features in Pater's portrait as both character and chief influence for the protagonist's philosophical theory, a controversial system rooted in a nihilistic belief in the "one substance" and in the denial of finite things and lives. The interpretation of Sebastian's consumption in the portrait closely follows that provided by Hegel for Spinoza. Hegel argues that Spinoza's consumption was "in harmony with his system of philosophy, according to which all particularity and individuality pass away in the one substance" (Hegel [1840] 1974: iii, 254). The "harmony" refers to the German term *Schwindsucht*, 'consumption', which etymologically recalls a strong longing (*Sucht*) directed towards the act of disappearing (*schwinden*), thus reiterating the yearning for the renunciation of particularity and individuality to be found in Spinoza's system ('pass away', *verschwindet*). In "Sebastian van Storck", Pater imagines a similar continuity between disease and philosophical theory:

> in his passion for *Schwindsucht* – in English, we haven't the word – he found it pleasant to think of the resistless element which left one hardly a foot-space amidst the yielding sand; of the old beds of lost rivers, surviving now only as deeper channels in the sea; of the remains of a certain ancient town […] dissolved and disappeared in the flood. (Pater [1887] 2014: 153)

Acting like the water that gradually erodes the Dutch land and polishes away all traces of materiality, consumption certainly transforms the Spinozist Sebastian into a diaphanous type, as indicated by the narrator's comment that consumption is the consequence of "a merely physical accident […] of [Sebastian's] constitution" (165), which echoes the diaphanous' achievement of effortless simplicity "by some happy gift, or accident of birth or constitution" in "Diaphaneitè" (Pater [1895] 2014: 79). And yet, Sebastian's frozen detachment is related to his predilection for wintry scenery and to his seeming, "if one may say so, in love with death" (Pater [1887] 2014: 158). This casts a sinister light on Sebastian's character, if only because of the indirect reference to

John Keats[6], a poet whose consumption in Victorian culture came to be read as a manifestation of insufficient will power and effeminacy (Najarian 2002: 11ff). While Pater admired Keats, in this portrait the vanishing of the self emerges as a form of weakness and renunciation of life and agency.

One further way to understand the extent to which Sebastian's refinement appears flawed is by considering that for Pater the truly artistic self vanishes in order to become receptive rather than to disappear altogether. Beyond their ideological and stylistic differences, Eliot and Pater do share the belief that that receptivity has an aesthetical as well as ethical function. Thus, if Eliot's major interest is in the moral value of sympathy, Deronda, like most Jewish-born characters in the novel, is endowed with a fine musical and artistic taste, and Mordecai is "keenly alive to some poetic aspects of London" (Eliot [1876] 1998: 406). In turn, aesthetic appreciation is impossible without the ability to sympathetically extend one's boundaries beyond the reaches of the self: "[h]ow should all the apparatus of heaven and earth […] make poetry for a mind that has no movements of awe and tenderness, no sense of fellowship that thrills from the near to the distant, and from the distant to the near?" (p. 175). Similarly, for Pater the receptivity of the diaphanous type, though primarily aesthetic, also has an ethical nature, the adjective "moral" recurring six times in "Diaphaneitè". In the portrait "The Child in the House", the protagonist's awakening involves simultaneously "two streams of impressions, the sentiments of beauty and pain" (Pater [1878] 2014: 88); similarly, in "An English Poet", the description of the protagonist's receptivity, embracing "all Europe in its priceless art and choicer scenery", is followed by the growth of "a *souffle*, almost like love" towards his friend (Pater [1931] 2014: 112f).

On the other hand Sebastian, by ascetically giving up aesthetic appreciation as well as social intercourse, may arguably offer a reflection on the limitations of what Eliot calls "the unemotional intellect [that] may carry us into a mathematical dreamland where nothing is but what is not" (Eliot [1876] 1998: 438). Indeed, while

[6] In her edition of the portrait, Østermark-Johansen notices the similarity with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale": "Darkling I listen; and for many a time/ I have been half in love with easeful Death" (Pater [1887] 2014: 158).

Deronda "exchang[es] that bird's eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance" (p. 638), Sebastian remains stuck to his predilection for "prospects *à vol d'oiseau*" (Pater [1887] 2014: 149). Although Sebastian's detachment might seem to accomplish the perfect selflessness required of the vanishing self, his aloofness also appears as a fanatical devotion to a form of "religious mania" that masks "a vehement assertion of his individual will" (p. 164). A similar form of ascetic willpower can be recognisable, in *Daniel Deronda*, when Mordecai is overtaken by the idealisation of his self-sacrifice: "I recognise [the future] now, and love it so, that I can lay down this poor life upon its altar and say: 'Burn, burn indiscernibly into that which will be, which is my love and not me'" (Eliot [1876] 1998: 628). But as Mirah intuitively understands as he reiterates the concept by telling her the story of a Jewish woman who sacrificed her life for the happiness of her beloved, this form of death was less the expression of selfless "surpassing love" than of "her strong self, wanting to conquer" (p. 629).

Rather than annihilation, truly artistic and moral receptivity needs to rely, as Deronda does, on the notion of "separateness with communication" (p. 620). If the act of self-vanishing is necessary to achieve sympathetic understanding, this cannot be done at the cost of giving up one's agency. Similarly, for Pater aesthetic experience always entails an opening of the boundaries of individual subjectivity that cannot result in complete passivity and surrendering, but that needs to retain, as Jeffrey Wallen puts it, "the ability to watch over what is happening, to note and analyse the powers in things, and to convey all their effects to others" (Wallen 2002: 86).

5. Conclusion

This article has shown how the pervasive presence of consumption in 19th-century imagination may allow us to work across the different cultures of science and literature in order to analyse issues related to the transparency, visibility and representability of the self that is about to vanish. The transgression of disciplinary borders has made it possible to realise how the consumptive bodies represented by scientific discourse turn into diaphanous types in Eliot's and Pater's

texts. By doing so, they destabilise *genre* conventions but also act as a bridge that undermines the rigid demarcations set by literary periodisation. While Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* have rightly been read as anticipating Modernist literary-artistic portraits (Bizzotto 2002), a comparison to Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* has demonstrated that they also partake in a Victorian discussion on the negotiation of the refinement and pathology associated with receptivity.

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