The Body Economic

LIFE, DEATH, AND SENSATION IN
POLITICAL ECONOMY AND
THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Catherine Gallagher

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INTRODUCTION

has led me to spend more time examining controversies among political economists than literary critics normally do; the book’s second chapter, for example, dwells among political economists exclusively. It has also led me to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that their theories were motivated by the same drive that animates most of us as professional intellectuals: a genuine desire to understand the phenomena they observed. It goes without saying that they did so within the terms and according to the protocols of certain historically determined mental operations (otherwise known as “ideologies”), which were by definition outside of their purview.

Like many other literary critics who have lately addressed themselves to these thinkers, I try to reveal and analyze those operations and to trace their resemblance to the dynamics we also find in literary works of the period. Displaying such overarching discursive processes has become a specialty of literary critics during the last several decades, and it has allowed for a more synthetic and a less platitudinous picture of relations between nineteenth-century disciplines and the relatively undisciplined textual practices we call “literature.” This study tries to explain how they were, at first, divided by common premises and then how their orientations toward each other shifted as those premises were revised in the course of the century. In the first two chapters, I trace a development in which political economists and their Romantic and early Victorian critics jointly relocated the idea of ultimate value from a realm of transcendent spiritual meanings to organic “Life” itself and made human sensations—especially pleasure and pain—the sources and signs of that value. I explore the stresses and contradictions attending this fundamental remaking of value within each discourse as well as the interchanges in which each tended to blame the other for its internal paradoxes.

Political economy, though, was not a static or monolithic entity, even in its “orthodox” phase, so the first chapters of The Body Economic outline the dynamic through which it developed what I call its “bioeconomics” and its “somaeconomics.” The first term, “bioeconomics,” refers to political economy’s concentration on the interconnections among populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally. In bioeconomics, “Life” is both the ultimate desideratum and the energy or force that circulates through organic and inorganic nature. Stressing the natural limitations on economic activity as well as the tendency of that activity to rearrange nature, bioeconomics was a set of concerns that derived primarily from the thought of Thomas Robert Malthus, whose Essay on Population (1797) was both a foundational text of classical political economy and a powerful critique of its theory of value.

I employ the second term, “somaeconomics,” to describe the theorization of economic behavior in terms of the emotional and sensual feelings that are both causes and consequences of economic exertions. This tradition of thought is deeply rooted in British empiricism as a theory of action comple-

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The motivation of the wealthy is difficult to explain in purely Benthamite
terms once the law of relativity is in place, and since marginal utilitarians
emphasized their Benthamism and their relativism, they were under a pecu-
liar necessity to reconcile the two. Jennings began by admitting that “they
who possess the largest share of Wealth often exhibit the greatest disregard
for pleasurable sensations” (189); precisely because they have had too much,
insensibility has set in. Jennings is here adverting not only to wealthy con-
sumers but also to the theoretical problem of explaining the behavior of
capitalists themselves, who must (as we’ve seen in previous chapters) learn to
prefer stockpiling the means of enjoyment to indulging in further pleasures.
Although Benthamism implies that sensation is the key to our actions, in
fact societies only become rich because numerous people amass much more
wealth than they intend to enjoy, supplying “Labour with Capital,” and
enriching “successive generations with the accumulated production of by-
gone Industry” (192). Jennings reconciles the surplus that makes capitalism
possible with the adage that we seek to avoid having too much of anything
by exempting value in the abstract (as represented by money, for example)
from the category of things one could have too much of, and by invoking
what he called one “of the strangest anomalies of human character”: “a trans-
ference of affection from Sensations [enjoyment] or Ideas to their material
causes [means of enjoyment] takes place, and in consequence of this trans-
ferrence, a desire to attain the former ceases to be, and a desire to attain the
latter becomes an efficient motive of conduct” (191). Jevons took the tauto-
logical route out of this difficulty by asserting that we are always motivated
by the prospect of maximizing pleasure, and hence anything we seek ipso
facio should be called pleasurable. Jennings, though, speculated that the
wealthiest have undergone a transformation of the usual pain/pleasure per-
ceptions, and in their minds, “the objects that were originally valued, only
because they afforded pleasure, have ultimately been valued for themselves,
independently of, or in opposition to, pleasure” (emphasis added, 191).

The somaeconomics of marginal utility theory, therefore, differed in im-
portant ways from its labor-centered predecessor, but in other ways it extended
similar lines of thought. Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, it
shifted the physiological basis of value and turned theoretical attention toward
the decrease of pleasure that accompanies satiety, building its system up from
that crucial insight, and it put further pressure on the already problematic
question of what motivates people when increased pleasurable sensation is not
a reasonable prospect. During the same years that Jevons was spreading his
ideas about the effect of surfeit on value, George Eliot, we’ve seen, was wor-
rying about the sheer “too-much” of literature and maintaining that each
addition to the pile of books was somehow less valuable than the previous
addition. She probably had not read Jevons by the mid-1870s, although it is
highly likely that she knew about him; friends of hers had reviewed his Theory,
often negatively, but they did not severely criticize the concepts I’ve been
describing. Indeed, they tended to think that those ideas were the common
property of the age, even if they were not sure how to incorporate them into
economic thought. Unlike Dickens’s, George Eliot’s intellectual milieu was
friendly to political economy; she herself read widely in the subject and was
knowledgeable about its central debates. In her career, we can see the waning
of that overt enmity between literary culture and political economy that had
characterized the first half of the century. She began publishing in an intel-
lectual London very different from the one that had shaped Dickens’s mind in
the 1830s; her milieu was permeated by radical scepticism, “developmental-
ism,” and materialist positivism. Political economy seemed a normal and
worthy endeavor among her acquaintances, and every well-informed person
was expected to have a knowledge of its latest episodes.

So even if George Eliot never read Jevons, the similarities between his theo-
ries of the role of surfeit in economic value and her theories of the decline of
aesthetic value through repetition should not surprise us, for they were con-
ceived in overlapping intellectual circles. In particular, they might be thought
of as parallel modes of receiving the psychophysiological innovations of Alex-
ander Bain. Indeed, while she was writing Daniel Deronda, in another room
of their house George Henry Lewes was occupied by his last work, The Physi-
ological Basis of Mind, which drew heavily on Bain’s models of sensation, will,
and intellect. Always interested in physiology and psychology, therefore,
George Eliot, in the mid-1870s, was unusually close to the same developments
in those disciplines that also inspired Jevons. The novelist, however, used those
concepts in ways that often problematize the marginal utilitarians’ conclu-
sions. George Eliot and Jevons assembled the same elements, and may even
have posited the same normal dynamics among them, but the novelist is far
more interested than the political economist in the forces that operate against
the norm. If Jevons wanted to tautologize away the question of why people
continue to accumulate once they have crossed the margins of pleasure, Eliot
wanted to explore that very question. She readily took up Alexander Bain’s
numerous excursions into those realms of psychophysiology that lead beyond
the ordinary action of the will,” which is “to gain our own pleasures and
remove our own pains” (350). “This,” Bain persists, “is all that can, strictly
speaking, interest us. Each organization is more or less formed to work for
conserving itself; and it would seem, at first sight, an irrelevance to go beyond
this.” And yet Bain and George Eliot try to explain what lies beyond “first
sight,” whereas Jevons modestly attempted to limit his inquiry to what he
called the “lowest” forms of motivation: “Motives and feelings are certainly
of the same kind to the extent that we are able to weight them against each
other; but they are, nevertheless, almost incomparable in power and authority.

and inclusiveness could you have?), literary critics are now more curious and
tolerant about economic logic than they were at any time in the twentieth
century.

Just in time to observe a turn toward interdisciplinarity among economists
who have lately begun to study the physiology of sensation and emotion again.
The press has greeted this development as a striking innovation in the history of
economics, and it does seem a departure from rational choice assumptions.
Economist George Loewenstein explained in the New York Times that “Under
the influence of powerful emotions or drives, people often end up doing the
opposite of what they think is best for themselves, even at the moment of
acting.” The reports of this new someconomics have an uncannily familiar
ring to any reader of McCulloch or Jevons. Here is Loewenstein a few months
later on the issue of pleasure and happiness, for example: “We don’t realize
how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of
our lives. When any event occurs to us, we make it ordinary. And through
becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure.” Although this was Jevons’s main
point, the new breed of interdisciplinary economists, who often work with
cognitive scientists and behavioral psychologists, oddly blame the neoclasi-
csists for banishing feelings from economic consideration: “[The neoclassical
economists] couldn’t include ‘the passions,’ or emotions in their models,
because they were too unruly, too complex.” Loewenstein is reported to have
said in yet another New York Times article from June of 2003. And yet, the
basic insights seem very close to “Utilitarian” psychology, with its emphasis on
happiness and pleasure, that Keynes opted not to disturb at the foundations of
neoclassicism.

So is this just a repetition from which we will learn nothing new? Perhaps
not; the current partnership with psychology and brain chemistry has led to
some conclusions that depart from the nineteenth-century theorists. For
example, whereas McCulloch and Jevons thought that constantly being pro-

pelled from one expectation of pleasure to another was a positive emotional
state driving the economy, and was therefore unproblematic, the economist
Daniel Kahneman uses the same insight to question whether or not the econ-
omy should be entirely reliant on consumers’ desires, since they are such noto-
riously bad “affective forecasters”: “If people do not know what is going to
make them better off or give them pleasure . . . then the idea that you can trust
people to do what will give them pleasure becomes questionable.” Economist
Richard Thaler proposes that “public and private institutions should gently

13 Quoted in Gertner, “Futile,” 86.