The Body Economic

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

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of formal relations between literary and economic writing and studies of the historical development of literature as an economic activity.[1]

Moreover, just as literary critics were exploring these topics, historians, political theorists, and even economists were revising and reinvigorating the history of economic theory. Instead of appearing to spring directly out of the ideological needs of industrial capitalism, the discipline we call "political economy" (that practiced by the "classical" economists, led by Adam Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus, and David Ricardo) has now been reconnected to the complex of late eighteenth-century intellectual endeavors gathered under the term "moral philosophy" (ethics, political philosophy, natural theology, conjectural history, and aesthetics) and has consequently acquired a pedigree that seems respectable to literary critics. We are also beginning to understand its central place among the developing human sciences of the nineteenth century, and its kinship especially with psychology and anthropology brings it closer to the orbit of nineteenth-century literature.

These investigations have produced a lively new subfield of nineteenth-century British studies, combining literary and intellectual history. Works by Boyd Hilton, Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, Mary Poovey, Regenia Gagnier, Christopher Herbert, Philip Connell, Howard Caygill, and Maureen McLane[2] have demonstrated that political economists and their literary antagonists had a great deal in common, which they were frequently unwilling to recognize. The present study is indebted to these earlier works, and it tries to combine their best aspects. For example, I've followed the lead of recent intellectual historians by taking political economy seriously as a discipline and not implying that it was merely a form of early industrial capitalist apologetics. This

[1] Some of the earliest examples of what came to be called the "new economic criticism" include Marc Shell's *The Economy of Literature*, and *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era*; Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economies of the Imagination*; Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*; Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*; Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750*; and Walter Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. See also my own *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820*.

[2] Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Collini, *Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950*, eds. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of "Culture"* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989); McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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-

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 peculiar 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 consumers 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 transference of affection from Sensations [enjoyment] or Ideas to their *material causes* [means of enjoyment] takes place, and in consequence of this transference, 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 tautological route out of this difficulty by asserting that we are always motivated by the prospect of maximizing pleasure, and hence anything we seek ipso facto should be called pleasurable. Jennings, though, speculated that the wealthiest have undergone a transformation of the usual pain/pleasure perceptions, 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 important 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 worrying 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 intellectual London very different from the one that had shaped Dickens's mind in the 1830s; her milieu was permeated by radical scepticism, "developmentalism," and materialist positivisim. 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 theories 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 conceived in overlapping intellectual circles. In particular, they might be thought of as parallel modes of receiving the psychophysiological innovations of Alexander Bain. Indeed, while she was writing *Daniel Deronda*, in another room of their house George Henry Lewes was occupied by his last work, *The Physiological 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' conclusions. 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."[14] 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.

[14] Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Longman, 1864), 350.

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."[11] The reports of this new somaeconomics 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."[12] 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 neoclassicists 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.[13] 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 propelled 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 economy should be entirely reliant on consumers' desires, since they are such notoriously 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."[14] Economist Richard Thaler proposes that "public and private institutions should gently

[11] Sandra Blakeslee, "Brain Experts Follow the Money in Studying Decision Making," *New York Times* (6/17/03): D4.

[12] Jon Gertner, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," *New York Times Magazine* (9/7/03): 47.

[13] Stephen J. Dubner, "Calculating the Irrational in Economics," *New York Times* (6/28/03): B9.

[14] Quoted in Gertner, "Futile," 86.

steer individuals toward more enlightened choices. That is, [consumers] must be saved from themselves."[15] And who can be entirely indifferent to the research that models economic interactions by studying brain activity during game playing, discovering, for example, that "in a game of mutual trust, women's brains show a big dopamine or reward response when they are trusted by others; there is no such response in men's brains."[16] Surely there is a novelist somewhere building a plot around that breakthrough. Hence, resisting the impulse to throw up my hands with a dismissive "*Plus ça change*," I'll hope that there really are things to be learned from the new interdisciplinary mixture. After all, haven't we learned that anticipating something new will always make us happier than attaining it?

[15] Dubner, "Calculating," B9.

[16] Blakeslee, "Brain Experts," D4.