

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 6
Number 2 *Fall 2007*

Article 1

Fall 2007

Review of Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*

Tamara Ketabgian
Beloit College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Ketabgian, Tamara (2007). Review of "Review of Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 2

Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol6/iss2/1>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol6/iss2/1>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 209 pp. ISBN 0691123586.

Reviewed by Tamara Ketabgian, Beloit College

The Body Economic takes as its point of departure the current explosion of scholarly work combining insights from economics, literature, and psychology. Yet, as its author, Catherine Gallagher, stresses, this "new economic criticism" is hardly new as a field of cultural and literary study; indeed, the same may be said for recent economic applications of psychology and neuroscience. Rather, these approaches resonate with a complicated and largely forgotten history of disciplinary formation, in which political economists and literary authors "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" (3). While today it may be easy to view the social sciences and humanities as distant—if not opposed—camps, *The Body Economic* shows how nineteenth-century political economy and literary "high" culture were, so to speak, fellow intellectual travelers. According to Gallagher, these fields shared and promoted two economic "plots": "bioeconomics"—how economy circulates life—and "somaconomics"—how emotions and sensations shape economic activity and are in turn shaped by it. Stunning in its breadth and erudition, her study explores these dual strands of logic not only in Romantic and early Victorian cultural criticism but also in later period novels and a remarkable range of evolving disciplines—physiology, psychology, moral philosophy, anthropology, comparative religion, and, of course, political economy from Smith to the present day.

Gallagher's book is impressive for a number of reasons. It includes two *bravura* essays from the 1980s still prized by Victorianists today for their New Historicist approach toward the body as an object of study. (The first, on Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew, appeared in *Representations* in 1986. The second, on *Our Mutual Friend* and bioeconomics, was published in *Zone* in 1989.) Gallagher has substantially revised and amplified these two essays, combining them with an extensive theoretical and historical account of competing claims to represent life, labor, value, and feeling. Presiding over this account is a single monumental figure: Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1797) has embodied for many the gloomy, forbidding face of the "dismal science." *The Body Economic* updates this view with a more dynamic and revisionist Malthus, whose emphasis on the laboring body as a site of value and vitality and on sexuality as a fundamental human drive made him "a pioneer of cultural theory" to whom "even his severest critics were indebted" (156).

Gallagher's book traces the neglected and strikingly diffusive path of Malthus's influence, finding it in many unexpected sites, texts, discourses, and disciplines—including shadowy narratives of authorial labor and subjectivity that pervade Victorian fiction. Under Malthus's overarching banner, Gallagher packs in an encyclopedic array of topics and insights that could readily support two books, if not three. We are now all Malthusians, Gallagher insists, in our fashion.

Her various chapters treat this diverse and complicated legacy, beginning with the efforts of Romantic critics and political economists to promote "competing forms of 'organicism'" (4)—a

term whose charged connotations this review will later revisit. As Gallagher notes in her first chapter, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and Percy Shelley all argued virulently against Malthus, but they still shared his emphasis on organic life as the "ultimate good" and on laboring bodies as the aggregate index of this value (34). Her second chapter expands upon Malthus's relation to classical political economy and his disruption of customary homologies between healthy individual bodies and healthy populations. For, by claiming that "healthy bodies eventually generate a feeble overall population" (36), Malthus highlighted a crucial breach in political economy between soma- and bioeconomic plots, between individuals and the greater social whole. Malthus's insistence in rooting value in "flesh itself"—in "the bodies of laborers, their collective material needs" (46)—placed him at odds with Smith's and Ricardo's labor theory of value (which emphasized exchange), but it also supported a new somaeconomic schema, which conflated pain with productive labor and pleasure with anticipated future enjoyment.

Gallagher's next three chapters show how these economic plots are influentially invoked and transformed in fiction by Charles Dickens and George Eliot and in related cultural texts. Chapter Three traces a striking resonance between the grim, "workful" world of *Hard Times* and political economy's "pain theory of value" (60). For, Gallagher notes, despite its reputed hostility toward Utilitarianism, *Hard Times* in fact promotes Bentham's somaeconomic emphasis on the pain yielded by monotonous, productive labor. Gallagher's next chapter explores value not only as a product of painful toil, but also as a feature uneasily suspended from life and labor alike. As she concludes in her masterful analysis of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and Edwin Chadwick's sanitary writing, the attempt to root value in bodily well-being paradoxically separates it from flesh and transforms it into a state of "life in abeyance"—the "definitive condition" of Dickens's narrative, the commodity, and the abstract form of money itself (97).

Whereas Gallagher's earlier chapters align Dickens with classical political economy, her fifth chapter compares Eliot's authorial anxieties to a newer trend in somaeconomics—William Stanley Jevons's marginal utility theory, which allied value not with labor but rather with the subjective desires of consumers for "just enough" rather than "too much of anything" (122). Like Jevons's theory of surfeit, *Daniel Deronda* displays Eliot's fear that her authorial overproduction will provoke a similar "decline of aesthetic value," making her "an undesirable but nevertheless bought commodity" (129, 131). To support this comparison, Gallagher shows how both Eliot and Jevons invoke sensory and neurological models of motivation posed by the physiologist Alexander Bain in the 1870s. Indeed, Gallagher suggests, *Deronda*'s "benumbed" characters are case studies of impaired motivation, revealing the crucial somaeconomic role of the nervous system in shaping will, emotion, intellect, and, sometimes, action.

Although it would be hard to rival the ambitious genealogy in which Gallagher places *Daniel Deronda*, her last chapter moves in even broader strokes, deftly surveying two routes of Malthusian influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideas of culture. In the first, she traces Malthus's imprint upon two mid-Victorian theories of primitive social organization, which focus on either cultural modes of preventing fertility (McLennan) or increasing food supply (Tylor). In *The Golden Bough*, Gallagher claims, Frazer fuses these two approaches, "sexualiz[ing...] the food supply" (169) with an account of mythic sacrifice and fertility that powerfully inspired modernist redefinitions of art, culture, and the symbolic. For her second

route, Gallagher addresses nineteenth-century realist fiction and, especially, Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which provides an alternate Malthusian theory of culture in both its "specifically procreative" aesthetics of sacrifice and spirituality and its emphasis on the novel's own ritual function as "the modern equivalent of primal sacrifice" (179, 182). For Gallagher, these different paths cast an uncanny Malthusian light on "the primal scene of the conception of [English studies]" (172) as we know it today.

The Body Economic ends with valuable insights on the division of the "two cultures" in the postwar American academy, with literature departments posing familiar Romantic arguments against the "'reductive' social sciences" and their "mechanistic" modes of analysis. Thus defined, the practice of literary study claimed a near "monopoly" on notions of "human 'depth,'" emotion, art, "ambiguity," "the unconscious," and "the irrational" (190-91). As Gallagher suggests, these aesthetic and hermeneutic standards eventually encouraged literature departments to critique their own disciplinary processes and to welcome other movements and paradigms from the social sciences. Moreover, equally telling, if unspoken, in *The Body Economic* is the persistent appeal of Malthus's prized categories in such English departments today. Through her study of contested disciplinary claims to the "gold standard" of life and sensation, Gallagher offers a richly grounded explanation for why now—at a moment of significant institutional insecurity for English studies—issues of affect and embodiment continue to preoccupy literary and cultural critics more than ever.

While *The Body Economic* shows how human emotion and sensation became privileged terms of literary study, it is the crisis and the aberrance of these feelings that largely dominate Gallagher's interpretations of fiction—whether of melancholic aimlessness in *Hard Times*, suspended animation in *Our Mutual Friend*, or of stasis and impaired motivation in *Daniel Deronda*. Almost all of her readings dwell on the challenged somaeconomic capacities of characters—their emotional perversities or deficiencies—and on similar obstacles posed by texts, authors, and readers seeking to excite or experience such feelings. Cumulatively speaking, these readings profoundly revise and recalibrate political economy's felicific calculus, placing far more emphasis on pain than pleasure. To be fair, Gallagher certainly follows economic theory by treating deferred enjoyment as at least putatively synonymous with pleasure. Yet, for a study that focuses so extensively on the operative terms of somaeconomics, we encounter very little on the pleasure of reading literature. Indeed, one wonders, especially in Gallagher's account of *Hard Times*, why individuals read at all.

For Gallagher, *Hard Times* is so dreary, weary, and aimless that it cannot even produce or anticipate enjoyment "at the end of its own process" (71). Like its economy of painful, monotonous labor, the novel's "economy of reading"

makes no attempt to engage the gears of hope and fear, avoidance of pain and anticipation of pleasure. Instead, it relies on an inertial movement, unstoppable and unmotivated, for which the appropriate metaphors are the mere passage of time and the grinding of the mill [...] [I]t practices an affective economics in which the drive to put in time has become utterly independent of any other goal. (71)

Hard Times complements classical political economy's "pain theory of value" with an innovation of its own: a pain theory of reading. However, these parallels between labor and reading also raise questions. Individuals presumably work—and produce value—in order to ensure their own future enjoyment and security. But if Dickens's narrative offers its readers no hope whatsoever of pleasure, why, according to Gallagher, should they "put in [the] time"? Why do we continue to read (and to malign) this text if it is such a soma-economic failure? Might it provide its readers with other unrecognized emotional rewards or incentives? In this respect, Gallagher's reading of *Hard Times* might be fruitfully amplified by psychoanalytic and narratological accounts of pleasure found *through* pain and repetition. For, only if we view pain as its own reward—as a masochistic pleasure—can we make sense of this novel's grim enlistment of readers and characters in repeating and reliving trauma, toil, and disappointment. Arguably, then, *Hard Times* engages in practices of Victorian cultural masochism recently viewed by critics Elaine Freedgood and John Kucich as "voluntary engagement[s] with pain" that yield pleasure by relieving anxiety about the future (Freedgood 105). As a "glorification of suffering" well-suited to industrial modernity, masochism transforms "pleasure-deferring" labor into satisfying forms of certainty (Kucich 4, 26), much like that realized by characters who, at the novel's end, continue "working, ever working, but content to do it and preferring to do it" (Dickens 218).

Although *Hard Times* highlights the aberrant feelings that widely concern *The Body Economic*, Gallagher's portraits of "odd" affect are complemented by derangement elsewhere—in the accounts of "odd organicism" (35) that occupy her first two chapters. Here Gallagher promises a more varied narrative of competing concepts of life in the early nineteenth century. She delivers insofar as she traces the complicated rhetorical claims laid to organicism by battling Romantic critics and political economists. Gallagher recognizes the role of political economy in transforming organicism from an earlier hierarchical model of a single, unified body politic to a more complexly interdependent vision of "a vital autotelic system, not only tolerating but also requiring dynamic conflict" (33). Such broad strokes, however, left this reviewer hoping for more on how actual definitions of organicism continued to evolve and register influence in the nineteenth century not only from political economy but also from other related cultural sources such as technology and physiology. (In Chapter One, Gallagher briefly mentions eighteenth-century Scottish vitalist physiology, but she does not extensively pursue nineteenth-century developments in physiology.) Indeed, while *The Body Economic* offers a brilliantly nuanced account of the cultural debate occurring over organic "life," including charges of deranged mechanism made by its various claimants, Gallagher still employs concepts of organicism largely devised and contextualized by Romantics such as Coleridge and, implicitly, by later postwar interpreters such as Raymond Williams and M. H. Abrams.

The Body Economic stresses the broad appeal of biological life as a cultural metaphor and vehicle in nineteenth-century Britain. However, Gallagher's overall conceptual model is still of the specific Kantian and Coleridgean variety, as it "privilege[s] natural processes, operating according to intrinsic and lifelike dynamics, over [...] artificial ones, mechanically constructed and willfully directed from without" (8). While this model was hugely influential, it was ultimately only one of many evolving variants of organicism, not all of which opposed life and mechanism quite so emphatically. For instance, Michel Foucault argues for the pervasive interpenetration of vitalist and mechanical approaches in nineteenth-century medical discourse (Foucault 359, 265). Similarly, other revisionist historians of science such as Michel Serres,

Georges Canguilhem, David Channell, and Laura Otis have shown how notions of organic structure were pivotally shaped by emerging technological concepts of mechanical coordination, "regulation," networking, and feedback control. These hybrid strains of organicism usefully supplement Gallagher's claims, by revealing how certain "odd" or mechanical structures might also be classified as alive by period physiologists, engineers, and philosophers.

For many present-day scholars, "mechanism" is still tantamount to a fighting word, used—much as Coleridge did with respect to political economy—to attack the objective and unfeeling approaches pursued by various scientific disciplines. In *The Body Economic*, Gallagher's opposition between organicism and mechanism has the unexpected effect of supporting these disciplinary divisions. The irony, of course, is that Gallagher otherwise expresses wariness toward the Romantic legacy that New Critics and Leavisites uphold in their disdain for economics and other social sciences. Yet this inconsistency by no means negates the sophisticated and provocative claims made elsewhere in *The Body Economic*. Rather, it still more persuasively illustrates them, by showing how even the most magisterial of critics cannot suspend herself from disciplinary histories and affiliations that remain retrospectively grounded in the division of the two cultures.

The Body Economic is, indeed, valuable precisely because it highlights a multitude of hybrid cultural aspects for which we today lack the most basic critical language. Gallagher's study reveals a need for new histories and cultural studies devoted to these crucial yet forgotten trends, continuities, and tropes in the formation of nineteenth-century culture. Some recent and tremendously exciting developments in this area may be found in Joseph Bizup's *Manufacturing Culture* (2003), which argues for the explicitly cultural and aesthetic aims of Victorian mechanical industry, and Jay Clayton's *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2006), which dynamically broadens and deepens our current understanding of nineteenth-century literary technoculture. Clayton's book is especially inspiring in its path-breaking approach to the misleading effects of disciplinarity on our historicization of the Victorian period. Clayton examines dense, unrecovered historical connections—"recessive cultural traits" (37)—and also emphasizes the careful and visionary act of cultural retrieval necessary in order to practice alternate modes of historical scholarship. His notion of "undisciplined culture" (8) provides an impressive and fruitful way to think through the conflicts plaguing literature and science and, for that matter, mechanism and organicism. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* is, for these reasons, a particularly incisive interlocutor for *The Body Economic* and the cultural divisions it urges us to consider so critically. We can only hope to encounter more work dedicated both to the reparative labor of cultural retrieval and to pioneering new links and affiliations both between and beyond the disciplines.

Works Cited

Clayton, Jay. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1970.

Freedgood, Elaine. *Victorians Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Kucich, John. *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.