

Superfluity and Suction: The Problem with Saving in The Mill on the Floss

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To survive Mr Glegg, and talk eulogistically of him ...—to have sums of interest coming in more frequently, and secrete it in various corners, baffling to the most ingenious of thieves (for, to Mrs Glegg's mind, banks and strong-boxes would have nullified the pleasure of property—she might as well have taken her food in capsules) ... made a flattering and conciliatory view of the future.

—George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 126-27

[T]he holder of wealth ... may be regarded simply as a mechanical means of collection; or as a money-chest with a slit in it, not only receptant but suctional, set in the public thoroughfare;—chest of which only Death has the key, and evil Chance the distribution of the contents.

—John Ruskin, *Works* 17: 169

In *Munera Pulveris*, his most sustained study of “pure” economics, Ruskin takes a radical position in his denial of the universally beneficial results of saving. In his schema, the hoarding capitalist is figured as little more than a prostitute, a “slit” for the collection of money set in the “public thoroughfare” of the street. This degraded and degrading hoarder is a figure of peril, whose figurative female genitalia evoke the image of *vagina dentata* (“not only receptant but suctional”) and thus suggest the possibility of symbolic castration for the hapless debtor whose money disappears into the coffers of the miser. Death is the only conceivable resolution to this horrifying and unstable situation; the elimination of the threatening figure releases the purloined stores of value in a discharge of economic energy, which yet remains essentially uncontrolled and uncontrollable—subject only to the operations of “evil Chance.”

Mrs. Glegg, the most sustained comic character in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, is hardly figured as a prostitute; she is the most aggressively respectable of matrons in a novel fairly bristling with such figures. Yet she is most certainly a hoarder, and in describing the relish with which she anticipates her future, Eliot also relies on the metaphors of an unruly body: one that takes pleasure in “secreting” in inappropriate places, one that demands an erotic “pleasure of property” akin to gastronomic delectation. Mrs. Glegg has already performed the symbolic castration Ruskin invokes; the premise of her fantasy is the death of her husband and her subsequent comfortable—and economical—widowhood. Mrs. Glegg's economic system is not only “receptant” but secretive; her imaginative act is a secret, just as her proposed plan of economy involves secrets *and* secretions (or secretive secreting).

For both Ruskin and Eliot, the hoarder is a grotesque creature, whose great economic mistake—the insistence on the unalloyed benefit of saving—is

Victorian received wisdom taken to an extreme. Ruskin's work, both in *Munera Pulveris* and elsewhere, forms a sustained critique of the economics of David Ricardo and his followers: he is both a sharp critic of laissez-faire capitalism and author of the pithy denunciation of the law of supply and demand as "false always, and everywhere" (*Works* 17: 136). George Eliot's economic predilections, which are my central concern here, are a bit trickier to untangle. While she was at one point engaged to be married to the arch-conservative Herbert Spencer, with whom she occasionally guardedly agreed on economic questions,¹ she certainly is far from a mainstream laissez-faire capitalist. Her coded critique of Ricardian economics, with its adherence to Say's Law and obsession with saving, I will argue, forms the philosophical armature of *The Mill on the Floss*. My aim here is to uncover Eliot's potentially radical critique by reading the novel as part of a broader cultural debate between the optimistic Ricardian vision of unlimited economic growth and the pessimistic Malthusian strain (of which Ruskin was a proponent) that warned of inadequate demand and ultimate stagnation.

In the course of this analysis, I will also respond to a more recent debate over the problem of the novel's implausible ending: the apocalyptic flood at the end of the novel that kills off its beloved heroine.² The tendency of modern criticism, where it has attempted to explain the elimination of Maggie, has been to ascribe it to the character's unruly passion and Eliot's unconscious need to annihilate the problematic female desire she embodies.³ My contention is precisely the opposite: that it is Maggie's *renunciation*—and the troubling questions about desire and demand that it evokes—that necessitates her sacrifice. Her great sin is not

¹ For example, see the letter from Eliot to her friend Sara Hennell, in which she comments on Spencer's sharply laissez-faire article "State-Tamperings with Money and Banks": "Herbert Spencer dined with us last week, and I had a talk with him about his monetary article, which interests me strongly.... He cleared up several questions for me, and inclined me to think that he must be in the right" (*Letters* 2: 422). Elsewhere on Ruskin: "What books his last two are! I think he is the finest writer living" (*Letters* 2: 255).

² Contemporary reviews of *The Mill on the Floss* berated the untimely and tragic ending of the third volume, while modern criticism, from Knoepfmacher's influential study of the early novels through Gilbert and Gubar's and Nancy K. Miller's treatments, also has tended to focus on the author's "murder" of Maggie. These critics, with the notable exception of Miller and Jacobus, have emphasized the distortions of plot or character that seem to be required by Eliot's "punishment" of her heroine. For contemporary criticism, see, for example, the reviews in the *Guardian* (Carroll 129), *Westminster Review* (Carroll 143), and *Dublin University Magazine* (Carroll 151). Knoepfmacher goes so far as to call the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* an "unquestionable failure" (8), while Barbara Hardy confines herself to some more measured tongue-clucking over Eliot's lack of standard formal elegance (2-12). And while Jacobus and Miller have, in their important and welcome analyses, focused on refuting in fairly narrow terms previous claims about the unnaturalness, clumsiness, or even desperation of the closure of *The Mill on the Floss*, they do so without straying too far from the basic questions of propriety and aesthetics addressed in the work they attack. See also Wasserman, Mundhenk, Bushnell, and McSweeney.

³ I chiefly have in mind Nina Auerbach's greatly influential reading ("The Power of Hunger"). And here is Neil Hertz on this issue: "[Maggie] is allegorized as Passion herself, as a figure at once of the natural and of the superfluous, a supplementary force as potentially dangerous as a flood, a messenger from the land of debt, the sort of natural disaster that invariably leaves its mark. That is why she must be destroyed like an IOU ... before the novel can end" (68).

that she wants too much, but that her consequent program of self-denial is too extreme: she “hoards” and “saves,” she defers gratification, too well. As with Ruskin’s prostitute/money chest image, her unruly sexuality is inextricably tied up with her perverse economics: her elimination is less about punishing female desire than about imagining a release of stored economic potential, a circulating “flood” of released value.

Only by uncovering the economic “unconscious” of the novel can we begin to imagine the potential radicalism of Eliot’s critique. She engages directly the various anxieties attendant upon the contradictory nature of Victorian economic thought: the obsession with monetary representation, the fetishism of objects of “inherent” value, and the fascination with hoarding that are all the results of a repressed conflict—which I will discuss at greater length in the first section of this essay—between the mainstream (Ricardian) and pessimistic (Malthusian) strains of Victorian political economy. Likewise, only when we read the novel through the lens of Victorian political economy can we make sense of the novel’s bifurcated structure and troubling ending; as long as the romantic mini-plot of Maggie’s great temptation, renunciation, and death is seen as uncomfortably grafted onto the central story of the Dodsons’ bankruptcy and regeneration, the ending, and her death in the flood, will seem an afterthought.⁴

In this analysis, I will first briefly sketch the conflict in Victorian economic theory between differing notions of capital accumulation and economic demand, an opposition configured both as competing “narratives” of capitalism and as a contradiction within mainstream economic thought. Then I will examine the role of political economy in the two different plot threads of *The Mill on the Floss*, locating the conflicting preoccupations of the Tom and Maggie narratives within the novel’s disparate concerns with growth, accumulation, and demand that are the inheritance of the fundamental contradiction at the heart of Victorian economic theory. These different concerns—especially the rhetorical preoccupation with excess and superfluity surrounding the activities and descriptions of Maggie—engender conflicting notions of proper closure and timely endings. The traumatic ending of *The Mill on the Floss*, I contend, is an end to both the “economic” and “romantic” plots; until it is read this way, it will always seem awkward and implausible. While it perhaps does not wholly succeed in suturing the rift between the two narratives, it certainly is successful as a resolution to the thematic problems inaugurated by the novel’s economic preoccupations. The novel’s aesthetic failure is its conceptual success.

⁴ For complaints of the irreconcilability of the romantic plot with the rest of the novel, see the critique in the *Saturday Review* (“The third volume seems to belong to quite a new story” [119]); the review in the *Guardian* (“There is a clear dislocation in the story, between Maggie’s girlhood and Maggie’s great temptation” [129]); and Nancy K. Miller’s analysis (“the last two books taken together as they chart the culmination of a heroine’s erotic destiny have a plot of their own” [45]).

I. Demand, Credit, and Surplus: Narratives of Capitalism

The rhetoric of classical political economy, and its elaboration in the popular journals, pamphlets, and tracts of the early and mid-nineteenth century, is riven between contradictory predictions for the future of capitalism. As Boyd Hilton states in his study of evangelical thought in the first half of the century, the period was characterized by “a persistent oscillation between optimism and pessimism, a constant uncertainty as to whether happiness or misery best testified to God’s efficient governance of the mortal world” (*Age* 35). While Hilton’s analysis specifically locates this oscillation in (amateur) religious economic writings, in the broader context of political economy as a whole, seemingly irreconcilable accounts of capitalist development are given variously by adherents of the Ricardian progressive-growth model and heralders of stagnation or the stationary state. At times, the popular account of the workings of capitalism seems to be a picture of self-contained, self-regulating circulation, something like the workings of a natural organism or a perpetual machine. At other times, the description is much more dire: the “dismal science” of political economy is an apocalyptic vision wherein no degree of intervention can stave off inevitable stagnation.

This tension between the optimistic and pessimistic strains of political economy can be described as a tension between those who feel the demand function is largely inconsequential and those who think it is of central concern. The notion of demand, which I will consider in more detail shortly, is the perceived antidote to that most vexed and ubiquitous question of *surplus*, which is the cause of much of the Victorian anxiety about the continued functioning of the capitalist economy.⁵ The great question of how to dispose of economic surplus is what divides the growth theorists and their critics. At first glance, the contradiction seems unresolvable. Ricardo and his followers insist on the unalloyed benefits of capital accumulation for the growth of the economy. They defend this position with an appeal to the “law of markets” first described by French economist Jean-Baptiste Say and popularized by James Mill. Ricardo himself provides us with the best summary of the law:

[T]here is no amount of capital which may not be employed in a country, because a demand is only limited by production. No man produces but with a view to consume or sell, and he never sells but with an intention to purchase some other commodity.... By producing, then, he necessarily becomes either the consumer of his own goods, or the purchaser and consumer of the goods of some other person.
(192-93)

Therefore, in the long run, it is impossible for there to be overproduction or over-accumulation of capital; stagnation, at least through a failure of demand to keep pace with supply, need not be a concern. This belief in the salutary effects of capital accumulation and the impossibility of general gluts reaches its apotheosis

⁵ By “surplus,” I mean that amount of goods produced, in any economy operating above subsistence level, that is greater than the basic needs of the society’s consumers (plus the replenishment of the means to continue producing those goods).

in the work of the most staunch believer in laissez-faire the Victorian era produced, Herbert Spencer, whose belief was so unshakable that he could blithely characterize capitalism, *ante hoc*, as an economic organization in which the “accumulation of surplus capital [is] ever going on” (331).

However, one of the most sustained considerations of demand in the early part of the century comes from a writer who is much less confident about its inalienable operation: Thomas Malthus. The work of Malthus—in his *Principles of Political Economy*, as well as his more (in)famous *Essay on Population*—is crucial in this regard because he codifies and popularizes many of the physiocrats’ insights about demand, which were becoming lost in the superficially optimistic fervor of the early part of the century. In this sense, he is the “father” of the demand strain in classical political economy, just as Ricardo is the “father” of the supply side and the labor theory of value which, according to one perspective, was ultimately triumphant from mid-century through to the rise of the marginal utility school after 1870. I will begin my analysis by discussing Malthus’s more radical thoughts on the demand function (largely leaving aside the Ricardian half of the debate, since the Malthusian strain in Eliot’s work is what I intend to draw out) and will then briefly sketch the ramifications of the concern with demand in the financial events of the early century. My intention is thus to draw a historically contextualized picture of one small aspect of early Victorian political economy—an attempt, as Maxine Berg puts it, to “integrate economic thought into economic and social change” (6) and, I would add, into the modes and themes of the novel as well.

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Malthus first directly addresses the question of demand in the section of his *Principles of Political Economy* where he considers the question of value. Having decided to reject the notion of “value in use” as a strictly metaphorical term, he turns his attention entirely to exchange value, which he claims “does not depend merely upon the scarcity in which commodities exist, nor upon the inequality of their distribution; but upon the circumstance of their not being distributed according to the wills and powers of individuals” (52). “Reciprocal demand,” as Malthus terms it, or the simultaneous desire of “individuals” for particular commodities that can be exchanged for one another, alone determines the respective values of those commodities. Malthus’s elaboration of this central concept throughout his career, his insistence on the importance of demand in the determination of value, separates him from the mainstream of Ricardian thought and its labor theory of value. Malthus, *contra* Ricardo, insists that it is not production costs that “create” value, but rather the desire of consumers to acquire and exchange commodities.⁶

⁶ Malthus’s exact position on the question of value has been something of a vexed issue for his modern exegetes. One common interpretation is that Malthus became converted to the labor theory of value in his *Measure of Value* (1823) and maintained this position in the second (posthumous) edition of the *Principles* (1836). This is the interpretation forwarded by, among others, V.E. Smith and, more recently, John Pullen, the editor of the Variorum edition of

The claim that value inheres in demand has several corollaries in Malthus's work. First, the invocation of demand as a crucial component in the determination of value means that demand is no longer taken for granted—it is no longer presumed to be a negligible variable that mechanically determines supply and can thus be discounted. Malthus is particularly concerned with the functioning of the “demand side” of the economic equation. This leads him to consider the question of who, exactly, can be depended upon to consume the products of capitalism in sufficient amounts to ensure the continued growth of the economy. At first, he considers the optimal proportion of “productive” consumers (those whose labors produce the material objects that alone constitute wealth) to unproductive consumers in a society. His great fear is, in fact, that capitalists do not possess a sufficient enough desire to consume to ensure the increase of national wealth: the “great object of their lives is to save a fortune” (465), not to enjoy the fruits of their labor. More importantly, they have little leisure time in which to consume, being obliged to work long hours in order to make said fortunes. Therefore, there must be “a considerable class of other consumers, or the mercantile classes could not continue extending their concerns, and realizing their profits” (466). Yet who are these consumers to be? It cannot be the laborers themselves, for two reasons. First, whether or not they have the desire, they simply lack the means to consume enough to take up the slack. Second, even if they were suddenly able to greatly increase their consumption of material goods, this intensified demand would so enlarge the costs of production, and thus diminish profits, that these hyper-consuming laborers would “impede the growth of wealth more by diminishing the power of production, than they could encourage it by increasing the demand for produce” (477). The remaining class, the landowners, also cannot be relied upon, since their level of demand is frequently insufficient to ensure the full employment of capital (475). The only hope rests with the “unproductive laborers”—the professionals and clergymen and soldiers and politicians whose labor does not add to the stock of material items clamoring to be consumed. A society cannot function without this crucial class of consumers; they appear, according to Malthus, “to be absolutely necessary” (477).

Yet even given this qualified assurance, Malthus is far from sanguine about the ability of the three classes together to accomplish the “consumption required.” He returns throughout his work to the question of how new demands are to be created and sustained, new tastes and desires implanted, new cravings for expenditure encouraged. This multiplication of desires is absolutely necessary in order to stave off the threat of over-production, over-accumulation, and general gluts. One of the ways these new tastes can be cultivated, for example, is through foreign trade:

Malthus's *Principles of Political Economy*. However, as Herbert points out, while Malthus accepts with qualifications the notion that labor commanded can serve as an *index* of value, he rejects Ricardo's claim that a commodity's value is directly *equivalent* to the value of the labor expended in its production. Furthermore, as Herbert claims, “all Malthus's subsequent argument hinges upon the proposition that measurable relative value is a function not of labor but of desire” (119-20).

No country with a very confined market, internal as well as external, has ever been able to accumulate a large capital, because such a market prevents the formation of those wants and tastes, and that desire to consume, which are absolutely necessary to keep up the market prices of commodities, and to occasion an increasing demand for them, and for the capital which is to produce them. (448)

This is a rare moment of qualified hopefulness for Malthus; generally, his invocations of the necessity of inculcating new tastes in the populace ends with his despair at the great difficulty of doing so. While this cultivation of “wants and tastes” is crucial, unfortunately, it is also a quite Herculean endeavor. Malthus claims, for reasons which I will return to shortly, that the desire to consume is a feeble thing when left to its own devices: “instead of being always ready to second the physical powers of man, [wants] require for their development, ‘all appliances and means to boot’” (470). For Malthus the desire to consume must somehow be propped up by society, consciously encouraged and not allowed to fall back into a state of ineffectual weakness. Malthus never clearly states exactly how these societal incentives are to work;⁷ however, he does give us a tantalizing hint earlier in his analysis, when he defends the supposed indolence of the Irish peasant by noting that “in the state of society in which he has been placed, he has not had a fair trial; he has not been subjected to the ordinary stimulants which produce industrious habits” (396). Apparently one’s “state of society” plays a crucial role in stimulating one’s habits and, presumably, one’s appetites as well—yet Malthus remains disappointingly silent about how this process works. What is more important for Malthus is the conviction that far from being a natural quality of humankind, the desire for material objects is a product of capitalist economic organization. This conviction of the very real problem of creating and sustaining consumer demand leads Malthus to a direct attack on Say’s Law and on the sanguine faith in the operation of demand that underpins Ricardian economics: “This doctrine [of M. Say] ... appears to me to be utterly unfounded, and completely to contradict the great principles which regulate supply and demand” (353).

Malthus’s conviction of the improbability of creating new desires for consumption leads to the second corollary of his demand theory of value, one that Christopher Herbert has discussed at some length in his analysis of the concept of “culture” in Victorian political economy: the persistent anxiety that there may be a cataclysmic *failure* of consumer demand (Herbert 105-28). It is not only the capitalists who lack a sufficiently robust consumptive desire to ensure the growth of the economy; it is not only the desire to save that leads one to forego the consumption of luxuries. There are, according to Malthus, two fundamental

⁷ Hilton takes a somewhat different view of this issue in Malthus’s work; according to his account, Malthus “did not prescribe measures to stimulate demand for productive labour,” emphasizing instead economic self-restraint and “diminishing production, both of people and of things” (*Age* 70). This is one way of resolving the seeming paradox in Malthus’s work between warnings of over-population and a fear of underconsumption. However, as I think I have demonstrated, Malthus was quite concerned to examine ways in which *consumer* demand might be stimulated and encouraged. This is the dimension of Malthusian thought that Herbert emphasizes in his discussion (116-28).

and irreconcilable desires at work in the human breast: the desire to consume and the love of indolence. One of the cardinal errors to which Say, Ricardo, and James Mill are subject, he argues, is "the not taking into consideration the influence of so general and important a principle in human nature, as indolence or the love of ease"; political economy must not assume that "luxuries are always preferred to indolence" (358). What is so striking about this warning, as Herbert points out, is the fact that it proposes that the insipidity of consumer demand, its lack of intensity in the face of a greater inertia, is every bit as fundamental a principle as the desire for luxuries—if not more so.⁸

For Malthus, one is either working too hard to consume the products of one's labor or too fundamentally lazy to procure objects to consume. In defining his position against that of Adam Smith, who had claimed that the desire of consumers for luxury and ornament "seems to have no limit or certain boundary" (qtd. in Malthus 468), Malthus demurs: "that it had no limit must be allowed to be too strong an expression, when we consider how it will be practically limited by the countervailing luxury of indolence, or by the general desire of mankind to better their condition, and make a provision for a family" (468). The two possible causes of a catastrophic failure of demand, a propensity to save and a tendency toward laziness (i.e., a too-feeble desire to consume), are inextricably intertwined in Malthus's analysis. Malthus marks the effective interchangeability of these two tendencies in an example illustrating the possible causes of a decline in demand for decorative trimmings. In the first case, a farmer who has discovered that he can obtain the necessaries of life without undue toil, and his "tastes for ribands, lace and velvet not being fully formed," will tend to "indulge himself in indolence," causing the manufacturer of these items likewise to slack off on production (358-59). In the second scenario, where a love of parsimony is the problem being considered, the farmer, "disposed to save with a view of bettering [his] condition, and providing for [his] famil[y] in the future" (363), will decide to wear simpler clothing and thus cause a chain reaction throughout the economy—which will, presumably, eventually lead to stagnation. It makes no difference that one of these causes of underconsumption is ostensibly noble, while one is a cardinal sin: for Malthus, the operation of the capitalist economy depends on a great desire to consume, and anything that interferes with that desire is inherently problematic.

For Malthus, these potential causes of underconsumption haunt his account of the "progress of wealth" like fraternal twin ghosts. At the same time, the failure of other economists to recognize their danger leads to a fatal misunderstanding of the way both the economy and economic models work. The misrecognition of both the feebleness of human demand and the dangers of parsimony generates the fundamental error upon which classical political economy has rested: it is "to found a doctrine upon the unlimited desire of mankind to consume; then to suppose this desire limited in order to save capital, and thus completely alter the premises; and yet still to maintain that the doctrine is true" (468-69). Malthus

⁸ Herbert also sees this principle at work in Malthus's earlier *Essay on Population*, wherein even the famous Malthusian will to procreate is checked by human beings' fundamental laziness. See Herbert 111-16.

himself makes no such mistake; he dispassionately declares both that “great powers of production” cannot be possible without “great consumption” (481) and, simultaneously, that the consumer taste necessary to ensure such great consumption is “a plant of slow growth” (359) that is perpetually in danger of dying.

The strong streak of pessimism in Malthus’s work can thus be attributed to his conviction of human beings’ innate laziness, insipid desires, and perverse desire to hoard. In fact, it is a striking feature of Victorian criticisms of Say’s Law generally, from Malthus and his evangelical popularizer Thomas Chalmers,⁹ through to Carlyle and Ruskin at mid-century, that they are so pessimistic: it seems that to invoke the notion of demand is to imagine its failure. On one level, this has a certain contrapuntal logic. Because the supply-side theorists, from Adam Smith through John Stuart Mill, who adhere to the labor theory of value and the promise of Say’s Law are necessarily sanguine about the operations of consumer demand (it is only by essentially dismissing the possibility of underconsumption that one can ignore the role of demand in the determination of value), the critics of the labor theory are left to sound the warning about the possibility of a failure of demand. Thus, a pessimistic view of the demand function, and the consequent possibility of economic failure from over-accumulation and general gluts, is the legacy of critics of the labor theory of value throughout the first half of the century.

The relationship between these optimistic and pessimistic strains can be seen, in diachronic terms, as a struggle for ideological dominance throughout the nineteenth century. John Maynard Keynes, writing several decades after the ultimate “victory” of the demand theorists with the rise of the marginal utility school in the 1870s, characterizes the debate over value in precisely these bellicose terms: “Ricardo conquered England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain” (32). While Keynes does see the debates over value and demand explicitly in terms of a battle for ideological supremacy, he greatly overstates the case for Ricardo’s victory: “Not only was his [Ricardo’s] theory accepted by the city, by statesmen and by the academic world. But controversy ceased; the other point of view completely disappeared; it ceased to be discussed. The great puzzle of Effective Demand with which Malthus had wrestled vanished from the economic literature” (32).

In fact, Victorian economic history is far more complicated than Keynes’s characterization: we have already seen an example of Ruskin’s critique of a dearly held tenet of Ricardian economics. In addition, there were many voices raised in opposition to Ricardo in the journal and pamphlet literature that were the popular fora for such debates. As historian Barry Gordon has pointed out, there is a lively opposition to Say’s Law and the rule of Ricardianism in the economic press throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century. Contributors to this debate in the periodicals included, in addition to Malthus himself, such writers as David Robinson in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and, by the late 1830s, Herman Merivale in the *Edinburgh Review*—that former bulwark of Ricardianism. George Poulett Scrope launched a series of sustained and cogent attacks on Say’s Law in the pages of the *Quarterly Review*, and even Thomas DeQuincey, a former

⁹ See Hilton, *Age* 64-70.

staunch Ricardian, began to sound the alarm against hoarding and over-accumulation by the 1840s.¹⁰ In fact, according to Gordon, the reputation of Ricardo in the periodicals was largely in abeyance by the end of the 1840s (“Criticism” 385); an even more precise (and dramatic) date for the end of “technical” Ricardianism could be given as 1831, the year that Torrens posed to the Political Economy Club the ingenuous question: “Are any of the principles first advanced [by Ricardo] now acknowledged to be correct?” (qtd. in Hilton, *Age* 65).¹¹

An even more important place to look for heirs to Malthus’s critique of Ricardo—particularly his adherence to Say’s Law—is in the amateur economic writers of the period. While the literary popularizer Harriet Martineau was a staunch and vociferous cheerleader for Ricardian economics, there was another group of nonprofessional writers who were just as influential in their *critiques* of Ricardo: the evangelical economists discussed by Boyd Hilton in his study *The Age of Atonement*. While there is no need for me exhaustively to retrace an argument so brilliantly elaborated elsewhere, I would like to touch on several points in Hilton’s work that are particularly cogent for my analysis. First, he discusses the tension between optimistic and pessimistic strains in political economy, reinscribing them as tensions between different religious ideologies (or, more accurately, between Christian or evangelical economists and their professional, largely secular, counterparts). Interestingly, however, Hilton uses these terms somewhat differently than I have presented them; he tends to characterize his evangelicals as “optimistic” even when they are exhibiting attitudes that I have labeled “pessimistic,” particularly the acknowledgment that underconsumption and gluts are a very real threat to the economy.¹² The reason for this seeming paradox, and one of the central insights of Hilton’s book, is that the evangelical writers are never more optimistic than when they are sounding dire warnings about the economy: periodic economic crises had come to seem “beneficial, timely reminders of the existence of providential government” (125). Furthermore, an essentially liberal-Tory attitude toward failure—that periodic bouts of bankruptcies are beneficial in weeding out the “false” fortunes amassed during

¹⁰ See Gordon’s two helpful overviews of the debates in the economic journals: “Criticism of Ricardian Views on Value and Distribution in the British Periodicals, 1820-1850” and “Say’s Law, Effective Demand, and the Contemporary British Periodicals, 1820-1850.” Economic historian Frank W. Fetter goes even further, claiming that it is in the columns of the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood’s Magazine*, “and not in the writings of Malthus, that one finds in the 1820s and 1830s the most consistent exposition of the idea that the operations of demand do not automatically guarantee full employment” (436).

¹¹ As Hilton points out, the posing of this question marks the end merely of the sway of Ricardianism in such technical economic questions as value, rent, and wages. The far more important questions for non-professionals, he maintains, are the questions of Say’s Law and effective demand.

¹² I have in mind Hilton’s discussion of economists William Whewell and Richard Jones, who, on the one hand, believed that the “facts of life, *once properly ascertained*, would assuredly illuminate the wit and wisdom of the deity” and that “*apparent evils would show up in their true if paradoxical light as real benefits, further evidences of divine contrivance*” and, on the other, “*rejected Say’s Law and anticipated crises of underconsumption or gluts*” (*Age* 51-52).

times of bubble credit—was also part of the evangelical ethos, with the added twist that commercial crises were largely seen as instances of special providence and the repentant bankrupt as “atoning” for collective commercial sins (131-47).

What is most significant about Hilton’s study, for my purposes, is his insistence that the critique of Ricardianism to be found in evangelical writings represents the “underlying attitudes and assumptions of the period” (6)—an “official mind” that I would characterize as the economic unconscious of mid-century England: the substratum of anxiety about the operations of consumer demand, credit, and the gold standard that we will see operating so insistently in *The Mill on the Floss*. Furthermore, for Hilton, the genesis of these underlying attitudes is squarely located in the writings of Malthus, whose *Essay on Population* he characterizes, following G.M. Young, as one of the two “classic texts” of his Age of Atonement (qtd. in Hilton *Age* 3-4).¹³ For Hilton, Malthus embodies that strain of clerical writing that evinced a belief in a “natural (and therefore limited) rate of economic growth, based on a natural or effective level of consumer demand”; economic change was “seen as cyclical rather than as linear-progressive” (67, emphases Hilton’s). It was the Reverend Thomas Chalmers, Malthus’s great popularizer, who “transform[ed] Malthus’s long-run stagnation thesis into an explanation of business cycles” (119) by conceiving of these cycles as “fluctuations” caused by *sin*, which fluctuations encouraged further sin—the only relief from which is through Christian faith (119-20). I will return to the question of the business cycle in my discussion of the Tullivers’ bankruptcy; at this point, it is enough to note that one of Hilton’s most helpful insights is his claim that Victorian analysts’ attempts to understand periodic commercial crises focused on “two quite different types of explanation ... : monetary mismanagement by government or Bank of England, and human avarice and ambition” (125). In other words, the problem of the gold standard and the great “sin” of speculation—two of the central economic anxieties of the first half of the century which are most painstakingly detailed in the novel under question.

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Speculation and the question of the monetary standard—and more largely, the question of credit—are inextricably connected in the Victorian economic mind. Many contemporary writers noticed that the period when England was off the gold standard (1797-1821) was a time of unprecedented growth, investment, and fortune-making. Even after the return to the gold standard, the cycles of quiescence-investment-mania-crash that seemed to be happening every ten years (with crashes in 1825-26, 1837, 1847, 1857, and 1866) kept the question of credit, value, and “real money” constantly in the forefront of public consciousness. It was, as several modern commentators have noted, the unstable and vulnerable nature of the credit system that precipitated these periodic crises.¹⁴ In turn, speculation, credit, and the monetary standard were also seen as intimately

¹³ The other is William Wilberforce’s *Practical View of Christianity*.

¹⁴ See, for example, Landes 204-06.

connected to the ubiquitous question of surplus. Not only does speculation (when successful) create great *economic* surpluses, but great *monetary* surpluses, often in the form of extended credit, are necessary for mass speculation. Furthermore, investment manias provide an outlet for surplus capital; for example, as E.J. Hobsbawm points out, the Great Railway Mania of 1844-47 provided opportunities for the investment of surplus capital that could not be disposed of previously (112-13).¹⁵

One of the reasons that paper money, along with the promises-to-pay such as memoranda of debt and checks that the Victorians did not consider "money," were so anxiety-provoking was, of course, the fact that the economy of nineteenth-century England was locked into this cyclical mania-crash pattern that periodically wiped out fortunes based on credit and (what we would term) leveraged investment. Because of these periodic collapses of credit, there was a real crisis of representation regarding the gold standard and paper issues.¹⁶ The fascination of the Victorians with the gold standard cannot be overstated. The 1819 decision to return to the gold standard by no means ended the debates; there were periodic challenges to the gold standard—the first of which, in the 1840s, Sir Robert Peel made it his personal crusade to fend off—and the debates between the Banking School and the Currency School continued throughout the decades following the resumption of convertibility.¹⁷ As one recent commentator points out, there was "considerabl[e] continuity between these later debates and the bullionist controversy" of 1797-1819 (Laidler 70). Heated exchanges over the currency issue raged in the popular periodicals of the day; Parliament spent untoward amounts of time arguing the merits of various monetary-standard policies; and, of course, the specter of gold haunted the pages of the Victorian novel.¹⁸ The intensive Victorian debates over the gold standard functioned as a sort of public reaction-formation, an attempt to resolve both the epistemological uncertainties of the credit economy and the unconsciously acknowledged contradiction between the perpetual-growth and stagnation models of nineteenth-century economics. The gold standard became a panacea particularly for proponents of laissez-faire economic policy. As one modern commentator has noted, the vast majority of Victorian economists tended to "defer to [the gold] standard as the major linchpin of a self-adjusting competitive economy" (Sherburne 142). Of course it was Ricardo himself who was one of the main proponents of the Bullionist position (Hilton, *Corn* 43-48).¹⁹

The Victorians thus grappled with the question of what was "real" money or value in a complex credit economy where it is impossible for all outstanding

¹⁵ I am grateful to Kristin Samuelian for bringing this passage to my attention.

¹⁶ Two very helpful studies have informed my thinking on these issues: Goux's *The Coiners of Language* and the more recent *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994*, by Brantlinger.

¹⁷ On these debates, see Hilton, *Age* 224, and Parry 105.

¹⁸ For detailed discussions of the historical context of Victorian "economic" novels, see Vernon, Russell, and Feltes.

¹⁹ Hilton's study contains an excellent précis of the bullionist controversy in Parliament.

memoranda of debt to be liquidated simultaneously. The understanding that this kind of economic organization is ultimately founded on the credulity, trust, and patience of its members is one of the many factors that, ironically, led to these periodic crises: “ironically” because without a widespread belief that the delicate infrastructure of the economy will sustain itself, that a promise-to-pay will remain good into the future, the infrastructure is doomed to fail. One of the most poignant examples of this psychological dimension is the famous incident in 1825 wherein a run on the Bank of England was stopped by the miraculous discovery of a box of 700,000 one-pound notes in the bank’s cellar—notes in which the public still reposed confidence, presumably, because of the recent return to specie convertibility.²⁰ Advocates of the gold standard believed that gold had inherent, “natural” value; if promises-to-pay could be matched up, one-to-one, with a particular amount of gold, then the uncertainties of the credit economy would be resolved. The credit economy, in effect, would be operating much like a complex barter economy, with traders exchanging items of real worth instead of mere certificates or memoranda of debt. (In fact, J.S. Mill insists on this very equivalence when he claims that “[t]he relations of commodities to one another remain unaltered by money” [3:507]—money meaning gold, of course.)

What is important about this phenomenon, for my purposes, is the striking obsession of characters in Victorian novels, including *The Mill on the Floss*, with fetishized objects of so-called “inherent” value. The hoarding of such objects signals a deep and unconscious anxiety about the operations of the burgeoning capitalist economy, so strangely at odds with the vehemently stated belief in capital accumulation and an unending era of growth. (I will return to this point during my discussion of Mr. Tulliver’s bankruptcy, horror of debt, and “end-of-life” balance sheet.) Just as fetishism in the anthropological sense of the word has been seen as a cultural “survival,” so too, it could be argued, is the fetishism of objects of supposedly inherent value a kind of economic survival.²¹ Such attitudes function as the symptoms of a repressed and deeply pessimistic economic unconscious.

* * *

Within Victorian economic thinking as a whole, then, we can trace the strains of thought that constitute the two competing narratives of capitalism: the unshakable faith in the good of accumulation and the limitless future of economic growth versus the apocalyptic doom of inevitable stagnation and the obsession

²⁰ This incident is discussed in Russell 46-47.

²¹ A tantalizing Victorian glimpse of the interconnections between anthropological and Marxian notions of fetishism is given by John Galt in his *Diary Illustrative of the Times of George IV* (1838-39): “Gold undoubtedly approximates to the nature of a criterion; but to consider it, in a commercial country, as possessing any more sacred character than that of a commodity, is one of those inconceivable absurdities which may be classed with faith in rotten bones and transubstantiation” (qtd. in Hilton, *Age* 115).

with “inherent” value.²² We can begin to see how these conflicting predictions about the fate of the English economy might be manifested in a mid-Victorian novel, notorious for its dualistic plot, largely devoted to a narrative of bankruptcy, recovery, and ultimate disaster. However, while the two different narratives devoted to Tom and Maggie might thus be seen as representing, in a fairly straightforward way, the two conflicting Victorian interpretations of capitalist growth, this reading flattens out some important subtleties in the bankruptcy plot devoted to Tom’s struggle and the financial preoccupations of his family. The Dodsons and Tullivers together function, as I will argue, as the very embodiment of nineteenth-century economic thought—and, as such, they also demonstrate the conflicted attitudes and obsessions that are the inheritance of a repressed conflict in Victorian political economy. We can thus read *within* the economic or “Tom” plot, in the minds and habits of the families themselves, the contradictory strains of optimistic striving and pessimistic fetishism found in the culture as a whole. The “Maggie” plot, on the other hand, stages a much more troubling and direct challenge to the superficially complacent Victorian economic worldview. Maggie’s story, inextricably bound up with questions of appetite, demand, and transgressive desire, presents an uncomfortable alternative to the prevailing economic theory from which all questions of effective demand have been banished. The reign of Say’s Law within the novel, which nullifies one side of the economic equation by pronouncing that supply creates its own demand, is troubled by Maggie’s insistence on foregrounding questions of demand, appetite, and renunciation. Furthermore, the “Maggie” plot, which invokes sudden, dangerous, and chaotic endings of all kinds, links questions of appetite and desire to questions of closure and metaphorical death, underscoring the threatening and problematic role of economic demand in the broader optimistic view of Victorian political economy.

One final note before I turn to a concentrated discussion of the novel itself. The question of “historicizing” *The Mill on the Floss*, and especially of making claims about the economic and cultural milieu of which we can see traces in the text, is particularly vexed because the novel was, of course, *written* in 1859-60 and *set* in 1829-44 (precisely between the two greatest economic crises of the Victorian

²² The argument can certainly be made that these tensions are present within classical political economy as a discipline and can even be located within the work of Ricardo and Adam Smith themselves. There is a still-ongoing debate over whether Ricardo believed that stagnation was inevitable under any circumstances, or only under the agricultural protection of the Corn Laws. Piero Sraffa, editor of the definitive edition of Ricardo’s works, is responsible for the so-called “corn model” view of Ricardian economics. This interpretation claims that Ricardo based his entire economic model—including the conclusion of the falling rate of profit—on the agricultural sector. Modern writers on Ricardo largely define their own interpretations either in accordance or disagreement with Sraffa’s reading. What I am primarily interested in establishing is that Victorian economic thought of both the Ricardian and the popular-Malthusian varieties was deeply conflicted between unbridled optimism and apocalyptic images of failure—and that the latter position was intimately (if unconsciously) bound up with the question of consumer consumption and demand. For an overview of recent Ricardo criticism, see Peach’s chapter “Interpretations of David Ricardo” in his *Interpreting Ricardo*, and also the recent articles on the Ricardo controversy in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* by Peach, Kurz and Salvadori, and Hollander.

age: the Companies Mania of 1825-26 and the Great Railway Mania of 1844-47). Many of the economic issues I have discussed were specific to the 1820s and 30s: the crash of 1825-26, which had not yet been naturalized into an explanatory framework of business “cycles”; the uncertainty immediately following the return to the gold standard and the resultant wave of bank failures; and the great influence of Malthusian economics chief among them. However, as I hope I have convincingly demonstrated, the deeper cultural anxieties attendant upon these issues were still present until late in the century (if not beyond). Debates over the gold standard persisted and even intensified; a new wave of crises, including the railway mania of 1844-47, kept the issues of credit and inflationary paper very much alive; and the specter of consumer demand was never entirely exorcised, but “live[d] on furtively, below the surface” (Keynes 32) until the rise of the marginal utility school in 1870. As Boyd Hilton points out,

the important ideological questions dividing Malthus and Ricardo were not [value, rent, wage, and trade], but the former’s physiocracy and the latter’s confidence that, in favourable conditions, Say’s law of markets would operate to ensure that supply created its own demand. On these points Ricardo, who died in 1823, is seen to have triumphed posthumously over Malthus.... It seems likely, however, that whatever professional economists thought, the Malthusian perspective retained a hold over “Christian economists” and over the “official mind” until the 1850s. (Age 65)

Because of this continuity, the line between Eliot as indulgent commentator on an earlier age and Eliot as mouthpiece for her own times is a blurry one indeed—and one, quite frankly, that it is not that important to draw. Eliot chose to set *The Mill on the Floss* during a very particular epoch in recent Victorian economic history, one that enabled her to portray such “quaint” customs as hoarding and a fear of speculation, but one that also resonated quite strongly with her own time. I hope to demonstrate that the issues with which her characters grapple in the novel were, by and large, also her own—if not also ours.

II. Victorian Versions of Capitalist Growth: Economic Narratives and the Problem of Debt

The narrative logic of *The Mill on the Floss* tends to reduce all questions of judgment to terms of debt and repayment. Everything in the town the novel depicts, we are told repeatedly, is related to a grounding principle of practical economy. In a long passage laying out the history of St. Ogg’s, the narrator tells us that the three main fears of the townspeople are “Catholics, bad harvests, and the mysterious fluctuations of trade” (118). While the last two of these are obviously a direct part of the “money-getting” ethos of the town, even the first is seen, by its estimable citizens, in terms of the great questions of trade and economy: the real reason the Catholics are feared, we learn, is because they can lay hold of property, not because anyone in St. Ogg’s is in danger of becoming a Papist (118). Dissent, similarly, is viewed as “a foolish habit that clung greatly to families in

the grocery and chandlery lines," while those who bothered themselves with thinking about these things in political terms are regarded as "dangerous characters: they were usually persons who had little or no business of their own to manage, or, if they had, were likely enough to become insolvent" (118-19). Every great question of the day is reduced, in this prosperous burg, to the terms of business and trade; even the upheaval of the late Napoleonic wars is remembered simply as a "past golden age, when prices were high" (118).

The great virtue praised above all others in St. Ogg's is, of course, thrift and good management, which are repeatedly characterized as maintaining a balance between expenditures and income. To live beyond one's means is the greatest sin and foolishness: while "there were people in St. Ogg's who made a show without money to support it," these people are spoken of "with contempt and reprobation" (189). The narrator seems to enter into the spirit of the town's preoccupations in his own descriptions of various of the novel's characters. Poor Mr. Stelling's main function in the novel—since he can barely educate Tom—seems to be as punching-bag for the narrator's own "contempt and reprobation" of improvident habits. He is invoked repeatedly as the type of striving young man whose boundless confidence in his eventual prosperity leads him to spend beyond his means: since he cannot yet afford the accoutrements of affluence he so desires, "it followed in the most rigorous manner, either that these things must be procured by some other means, or else that the Rev. Mr. Stelling must go without them—which last alternative would be an absurd procrastination of the fruits of success, where success was certain" (135).

While the specter of failure haunts the psyches of the inhabitants of St. Ogg's, and their ethos of management and thrift is the ruling standard of economic behavior, it should certainly not be assumed that this precludes their vigorous striving and admiration of successful speculation. There is an uneasy truce between the respective virtues of minimal wants and great incomes; while the goal is always a balance between what comes in and what goes out, it is not always clear which end of the equation should be adjusted when this balance is lacking. While, on the one hand, the narrator sarcastically comments that people like Mr. Stelling are somehow morally lacking because, when faced with a disproportion between wants and income, they tend to conclude that "since wants are not easily starved to death, the simpler method appear[s] to be—to raise their income" (167), he also comments (ironically, but not without some degree of approbation) that the desire to better one's lot is a national, if not human, characteristic: "is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute—or ... that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute?" (152).

But whether the virtue of good management is characterized as striving or starving, and whether it is ultimately the unique province of human beings, the British, or the residents of St. Ogg's, it reaches its apotheosis in the Dodson and Tulliver families.²³ It is the economic worldview of these families that is the

²³ In analyzing the "economic narrative" of the novel, I will discuss the Dodsons and Tullivers together, and use their names somewhat interchangeably. For the purposes of my argument, their economic philosophies are the same—those few instances where a Dodson or a Tulliver

philosophical source of the “Tom” narrative of economic regeneration. The family traditions include (and these are certainly not the least important of the list) the “hoarding of coins likely to disappear from the currency [and] the production of first-rate commodities for the market” (274). Here, again, the narrator invokes the different aims of saving—effectively equivalent to limiting demand—and production. All the members of the family share these managerial habits; it is a point of pride with the Dodsons (and spouses) to think of nearly all things in terms of economical management. The “secretive” Mrs. Glegg herself, of course, is the supreme monarch of this little saving nation; her husband, who chose his bride as the “embodiment of female prudence and thrift” (121), finds her “household ways a model for her sex” (122), displeased though he may be with their state of conjugal warfare.

But further than this, the Dodson family are the very embodiment of the concerns of Victorian political economy; they all demonstrate, to a greater or lesser degree, both strains of economic thinking I have already discussed. On the one hand, the Dodsons demonstrate a great faith in the benefits of accumulation and an unquestioning belief in capitalism’s infinite growth, which we see in their veneration of “capital,” interest, and profits, as well as in their professed faith in the continuing and limitless prosperity of the new industrial economy. On the other hand, their habits and predilections demonstrate the deep suspicion of credit and memoranda of debt—and the concomitant obsession with gold and hoarding—that I have argued is the effect of the contradiction between competing narratives of capitalism. This suspicion manifests itself particularly in the Dodsons’ obsession with saving, their fetishistic desire to have their money physically before them, and their old-fashioned notions of debt and deficit. While both strains are present in the preoccupations of the Dodsons, the latter does not constitute a real challenge to the prevailing nineteenth-century ideology of capitalist striving; the anxiety over credit and debt for most Victorians coexists with a belief in the efficacy of Say’s Law. While the Dodsons may demonstrate a nascent fear of an end to capitalism, it will be up to Maggie, with her huge appetites and melodramatic self-denial, to develop this possibility to its logical conclusion, and mount a real challenge to the comfortable faith in accumulation and effective economic demand.

To begin with the first set of Dodsonian economic issues: the Dodsons and Tullivers are creatures of their times in their great faith in the continued growth of the capitalist economy and the unalloyed benefits thereof. The very concept of “capital” is revered by everyone concerned—so much so that the lack of it is seen as a moral failure, a sign of insufficient economy or striving. When he wants to steel himself to cash in his bond with his sister, Mr. Tulliver whips himself into a state of indignation over his brother-in-law Moss’s deficiencies in this regard: “he got up a due amount of irritation against Moss as a man without capital” (77). This unfortunate lack even trumps, for Tulliver, the great virtue of diligent work: when Moss protests that there “isn’t a day-labourer works harder” than himself, Mr. Tulliver rejoins with, “What’s the use o’ that ... when a man marries, and’s

attempts to differentiate his family from the other are, I believe, wholly ironic from the point of view of the narrator.

got no capital to work his farm but his wife's bit o' fortin?" (82). Similarly, Mr. Tulliver understands on some level that the very invocation of this word will help smooth over any familial protestations about his plans for Tom's schooling: "Tom's eddication 'ull be so much capital to him." Regardless of whether or not this assertion is true (and subsequent events demonstrate that it is not), the magic word certainly goes over well with Mr. Glegg: "Ay, there's something in that," he puts in, inspired enough to break into a little poem (71).

This veneration of capital extends into other venerationes as well—of profits and interest. Again, this principle is seen chiefly in the fear of its opposite; Mr. Glegg is so deeply committed to the idea of profiteering that he cannot abide the idea of Bob's wanting to help Tom speculate on Laceham goods without taking a cut for himself: "Well, but it's nothing but right you should have a small percentage.... I've no opinion o' transactions where folks do things for nothing. It allays looks bad" (315). The Dodsons, in fact, do everything at interest; Mrs. Glegg refuses to lend money to Tom for this same speculation on anything other than those terms: "I mean you to pay me interest, you know—I don't approve o' giving" (324). This focus on the bottom line, to the expense of even familial obligation and fellow-feeling, shows the Dodsons and Tullivers under the sway of the great Victorian faith in economic progress, growth, and accumulation.

All of this optimistic faith in striving is, of course, the direct result of the family's confidence in the promise of Say's Law—the tenet that unlimited growth is possible and that there will always be an effective demand for all goods produced. Mr. Deane himself gives a neat summary of this philosophy in an impromptu lecture to Tom: "Ours is a fine business—a splendid concern, sir—and there's no reason why it shouldn't go on growing; there's a growing capital, and growing outlets for it" (397). In this same lecture he also echoes the narrator, telling Tom that the very pace of economic growth is far greater than it was when he was starting out: "[T]he world goes on at a smarter pace now than it did when I was a young fellow" (395). In this little homily, Mr. Deane speaks as the very figure of the prosperous Victorian man of business: growth is strong, will only get stronger, and the narrative of progress seems to have no end.

Yet both the Dodsons and Tullivers also evince, simultaneously, the equally prevalent Victorian *fear* of profiteering and speculation: they are, of course, nearly maniacal about the virtues of saving for the sake of saving.²⁴ The narrator specifically mentions this attribute as an example of the family's economic old-fashionedness: "This inalienable habit of saving, as an end in itself, belonged to the industrious men of business of a former generation, who made their fortunes slowly ... —it constituted them a 'race,' which is nearly lost in these days of

²⁴ This contradiction is not unusual among the early Victorians; Russell attributes it to "a new public hypocrisy that speculated with one hand and condemned speculation with the other" (26). Or as Davidoff and Hall put it, "The growing commitment to new commercial forms among sections of the middling ranks jostled with fears and anxieties of the dangers inherent within them" (20).

rapid money-getting" (121).²⁵ This paradigm explicitly opposes the possibilities for accumulation characteristic of the modern capitalist age to the more sober methods that are suspicious of speculation and places the Dodsons firmly on the side of the latter. They are the embodiment of Malthus's hoarding capitalist, squirreling money away for the provision of dependents. This characterization is borne out by the central importance of the family chest and tin money box in the mind of Mr. Tulliver. As he lies seemingly near death after the initial shock of bankruptcy, it is the sound of the chest clanging shut that alone can rouse him:

Perhaps there was something in that sound more than the mere fact of the strong vibration that produced the instantaneous effect.... In the same moment when all the eyes in the room were turned upon him, he started up and looked at the chest, the parchments in Mr Glegg's hand, and Tom holding the tin box, with a glance of perfect consciousness and recognition. (221)

The sound of the great chest, which is home both to the money box and his sister Gritty's note of debt, is of such deep-seated import in Tulliver's thrifty, money-saving unconscious that it can awaken him from a state in which he could not even recognize the members of his family.

The Dodsons' great faith in saving is closely allied with their need to have their money physically before them: this is their fetishistic counterpart to the ubiquitous Victorian obsession with gold and suspicion of promises-to-pay. During the long process of saving to pay back the family's creditors, Mr. Tulliver becomes fixated on the idea of having the growing pile of money in the house where he can see it and touch it: "The little store of sovereigns in the tin box seemed to be the only sight that brought a faint beam of pleasure into the miller's eyes" (278). Similarly, even after Tom informs his father that he has earned the money to pay off all the debts—significantly, through speculation and not the slow process of saving—his father cannot believe it until he lays eyes on the cash: "I wish you'd brought me the money to look at, Tom," he said, fingering the sovereigns on the table; "I should ha' felt surer" (351). Mr. Tulliver's need for the present, physical object of value is characterized as unnecessary over-caution in the logic of the novel. When Tom approaches his father about investing in that same speculation that eventually allows them to pay off their debts, he refuses: "Mr Tulliver would not consent to put the money out at interest lest he should lose it" (311). It turns out he is dead wrong in this fear, but the characterological point is made: he is truly of the old-fashioned school of "money-getting." We have already seen, of course, the lengths to which Mrs. Glegg takes the "fetishism of commodities": her imagined "secretion" of funds in various corners underscores the sense of money as a direct outgrowth of her own body. She is a fetishist of the first order.

While the need for the object of "intrinsic" value (sovereigns in a tin box, money secreted in corners) is paramount, in its absence, its signifier (the note or

²⁵ It is difficult to imagine why Eliot would characterize the 1820s as anything other than "days of rapid money-getting," but, however historically inaccurate her portrait, it is clear that she wishes at this point to emphasize the Tullivers' atavistic fear of speculation.

promise-to-pay) takes on an almost equal significance. Victorian anxieties about the liquidation of memoranda of debt—occasioned, as I have argued, by the epistemological uncertainties attendant upon the growing credit economy—is admirably demonstrated by the Dodson family. When Tom informs the family council gathered about Mr. Tulliver's sick-bed that his father's wish was to release Gritty from her debt to him, he naturally suggests that they destroy the note so that it will not fall into the hands of Tulliver's creditors. While everyone present agrees on the justice of this plan, they are almost comically reluctant to perform the actual deed. Uncle Glegg's "good feeling led him to enter into Tom's wish, but [he] could not at once shake off his habitual abhorrence of such recklessness as destroying securities," while even hidebound Mrs. Glegg approves of Tom's sentiment and yet is still secretly horrified at "this wicked alienation of money" (219). The destruction of the promise-to-pay uncomfortably evokes the fear of an unstable correspondence between paper and gold: the flip side of a note without an inherently valuable good to liquidate it is the senseless destruction of the sign that stands for that valuable good in the first place. The Dodsons' reaction to Tom's humane suggestion is indicative of that deep Victorian anxiety about the (impossible) simultaneous liquidation of all memoranda of debt.

The Dodson family's economic anxieties are manifest in their marked concern with maintaining a perfectly circular and self-contained balance between income and expenditure: they have a very horror of debt, deficit, and waste. As we learn at one point, they have the narrow and petty habit "of regarding life as an ingenious process of nibbling out one's livelihood without leaving any perceptible deficit" (121-22). This strict adherence to the goal of self-contained economy, literally without surplus or deficit, marks the family as true inheritors of the Victorian suspicion of the credit economy and its unstable value correspondences and inflationary issues. The narrator himself comments on this familial predilection, pointing out its archaism:

These narrow notions about debt, held by the old-fashioned Tullivers, may perhaps excite a smile on the faces of many readers in these days of wide commercial views and wide philosophy, according to which everything rights itself without any trouble of ours: the fact that my tradesman is out of pocket by me, is to be looked at through the serene certainty that somebody else's tradesman is in pocket by somebody else; and since there must be bad debts in the world, why, it is mere egoism not to like that we in particular should make them instead of our fellow-citizens. (279)

Once again, the family's suspicion of the operations of the modern credit economy is seen as quaint and old-fashioned—and that old-fashionedness is valorized. What is particularly interesting about this passage is the way in which it links ethical and monetary economies. The real standard of ethical behavior is self-denial, a mode of conduct that would shoulder the burden of debt without recourse to a larger balance of claims and consequences.

And yet the narrator contradicts his own claims of capacious judgment in the interests of that ethos of self-denial. In an atypical endorsement that marks it

rather the thought of the narrator than of the man himself, Mr. Glegg at one point reminds Tom of the inter-connectedness of all financial transactions and of the importance of taking this wider view of his own deeds: "But there's a deal o' things to be considered, young man ... when you come to money business, and you may be taking one man's dinner away to make another man's breakfast" (220). Sometimes the wide view is praised, sometimes it is reviled: the narrator's real motivation is an unswerving endorsement of self-denial, and whichever "scope" of examination will answer that end at the given moment is the one he promotes.

And yet, while the narrator's approval of self-denial in general is quite pronounced, the logic of the narrative itself—at the level of plot—has a somewhat more conflicted agenda. While Maggie's restraint in refusing Stephen is strenuously praised by the narrative voice, we must still account, of course, for her spectacular sacrifice in the flood at the end of the novel. Maggie's great sin is not as straightforward as it may seem: the reason she is so ruthlessly eliminated at the end of the novel, while usually declared to be her unruly and inappropriate desires or "demonic" nature, is equally her heroic restraint and denial of those desires.²⁶ The real reason criticism of the novel has had such a difficult time answering the question of Maggie's "failure," the reason she must die at the end of the book, is that it is the wrong question: Maggie does not die because she fails either in her self-denial or, alternatively, in her embrace of life. Maggie's real "problem" is that she *succeeds* in questioning too closely the dearly held assumptions of her economic time, ostentatiously staging a debate between the virtues of economic demand and self-restraint—a debate that the ruling ideology of Victorian economic thought is not prepared to consider or countenance.

III. Very Irregular Polygons: Maggie's Desires and the Problem of Superfluity

For many critics of *The Mill on the Floss*, as I have already noted, the problem with Maggie is her immoderate appetites and great wants. This reading seems intuitive; it is certainly the one that is offered and supported by the narrator in his descriptions of Maggie, particularly in her childhood. From our very first glimpses of Maggie as a young girl, her inordinate appetites are getting her into trouble. In the notorious jam puff scene, for example, she inadvertently angers Tom because she fails to donate part of the "best bit" of the puff that she has won in the hand-guessing game. While she is more than willing to give Tom the larger piece without the pretense of guessing, once she has won it, she loses herself in enjoyment of the treat: she eats her share "with considerable relish as well as rapidity" and is "lost to almost everything but a vague sense of jam and idleness" (46). Tom, of course, pounces on her as soon as she is done, denouncing her as greedy for not giving him some of her share, being quite "conscious of having acted very fairly" in dividing it in the first place (46). What is particularly striking

²⁶ The more usual view is that Maggie is punished for her inordinate desires; see, for example, Auerbach's analysis. Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, suggest that Maggie is "most monstrous when she tries to turn herself into an angel of renunciation" (491).

about this scene is the way in which it conjoins questions of appetite and ethical behavior; it is our first example of Maggie's comportment under a strong sense of desire and conflicting imperatives. While she seems quite selfless in her initial desire to give Tom the best piece of pastry without the pretense of a guessing game, the narrator "fear[s] she cared less that Tom should enjoy the utmost possible amount of puff, than that he should be pleased with her for giving him the best bit" (45). Even Maggie's impulse to "self-denial" is in the interest of a greater need: for Tom's approval and love. Once she has made this point, she can give in to a more immediate appetite and devour the puff with impunity, little knowing that Tom is under the sway of a different ethical imperative altogether. For Maggie, the goal is to appear self-sacrificing, while for Tom it is to appear scrupulously fair: "if I go halves, I'll go 'em fair—only I wouldn't be a greedy" (46). Tom's "economic" viewpoint demands that he evenly divide "that very irregular polygon into two equal parts" (45), while Maggie's viewpoint mutates from an appearance of sacrifice in a gambit for love to a genuine enjoyment of her prize. At this early stage of Maggie's ethical development, the appearance is of greater importance than the charity; as odious as we may find Tom's behavior, he is right in exposing Maggie's generosity as a sham: she promptly forgets about him and his inferior piece of puff once her point has been made.

It is in the service of gaining Tom's approval that this point *is* made. Perhaps Maggie's most striking attribute is her boundless desire for love. The narrator comments on this aspect of her character on several different occasions; one of the times she hides in the attic after a scolding from Tom, she can stay only for "five dark minutes" before she longs to be with him again: "the need of being loved, the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature, began to wrestle with her pride, and soon threw it" (37). Even at this early stage, Maggie's craving for love is figured as something she strives to subdue, one aspect of a great and ongoing struggle. Yet the craving is nearly always the winner: "It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love—this hunger of the heart—as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world" (38-39).

These great appetites of Maggie's childhood do not disappear with her youth. Despite the influence of Thomas à Kempis on our heroine (to which I will return shortly), the novel's rhetoric of desire and appetite increases sharply during Maggie's young womanhood. Maggie is conscious of her uniqueness in this regard: she thinks it is "part of the hardship of her life that there was laid upon her the burthen of larger wants than others seemed to feel" (288). Later, she reveals this interpretation of her own character to Philip, claiming that the problem she had as a child is with her still: "I was never satisfied with a *little* of anything. That is why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether" (328). Her self-description is particularly poignant since it suggests that all her experimentation in self-denial has failed to give her relief; it is particularly telling because it indicates that her sense of abnormal appetite is primeval, if not innate—not an effect of her family's later privation.

It seems that there is no arena of life safe from Maggie's immoderate appetites; her catalogue of dissatisfactions is, to say the least, idiosyncratic: she wants

“books with *more* in them” (286), “more instruments playing together,” voices that are “fuller and deeper” (328). In fact, the danger is that Maggie’s appetites may, theoretically, never be fulfilled. The narrator claims that restraint is an all-or-nothing proposition for her: once she has forsaken that “simple rule of renunciation,” she is under the sway of “the seductive guidance of illimitable wants” (325). Maggie cannot even renounce in moderation; her self-denial must be greater, more absolute, than anyone else’s.

While Maggie’s own rhetoric thus locates her “problem” in her immoderate appetites, the novel persistently suggests that it is Maggie’s attempts to *deny* her desires that are the real source of her anguish. At first, this interpretation comes from the mouth of Philip, in a lecture he delivers to Maggie in the Red Deeps: “It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations.... You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite” (329). Both the logic of the narrative, of course, and Maggie’s own subsequent admissions affirm this interpretation. Later, Maggie unequivocally endorses Philip’s view after she has gone to stay with Lucy Deane: “[S]o many things have come true that you used to tell me.... You used to say I should feel the effect of my starved life, as you called it, and I do” (413-14). And during her great struggle with romantic temptation, we are told, in a dramatic interjection that is poised between the consciousness of the narrator and the consciousness of Maggie, that “it seemed to her as if all the worst evil in her had lain in ambush till now, and had suddenly started up full-armed, with hideous, over-powering strength!” (458).

The problem with Maggie’s plan of renunciation, as I have suggested, is that it is, itself, immoderate. Eliot seems to have an unconscious horror (a word that becomes even more appropriate during the novel’s apocalyptic ending) of Maggie’s plan of self-deprivation. One of the reasons for the extremity of this plan seems to be her misreading of à Kempis. From the very beginning of her acquaintance with *The Imitation of Christ*, when she first encounters the “little, old, clumsy book” and begins to read where the “quiet hand pointed” (289), she misunderstands the real concept of renunciation: “Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it” (291). Maggie’s project of self-denial is just one more manifestation of her great appetite and large desires.²⁷

One way of reading the novel, of course, is as a kind of bildungsroman wherein Maggie comes to understand the real meaning of à Kempis and to embody it in her renunciation of Stephen. This seems to be the interpretation she herself prefers: “Philip had been right when he told her that she knew nothing of renunciation: she had thought it was quiet ecstasy; she saw it face to face now—that sad patient loving strength which holds the clue of life—and saw that the thorns were for ever pressing on its brow” (471). This reading actually emphasizes the intractable nature of Maggie’s appetites; her real nature has not changed, she is still “abnormal” in her desires, which are greater and more inappropriate than other people’s. She may, in the course of the novel, have learned

²⁷ Jacobus suggests such a reading, in the service of a different argument, when she notes that “Eliot saw in Thomas à Kempis a language of desire” (220).

better how to accept the pain of her unique burden, but the persistent sense of Maggie as exceptional—and even monstrous—is not touched by this didactic reading.

In fact, Maggie's monstrous childhood desires merely mutate into monstrous sexual desires. The "savage appetite" Philip warns her against is the return of her childish craving for love in a new form. Maggie is perhaps the most obviously sexual of Eliot's heroines (the transgressive Hetty excepted); as Margaret Homans has noted, the novel dwells almost obsessively on highly sensual descriptions of Maggie's "large round arms," "queenly" hair, and well-developed physique ("Dinah's" 176-77). This type of narratorial attention begins with—just as her entrance into womanhood is marked by—Maggie's visit to her cousin Lucy's house, with its musical parties, boating expeditions, and courtly gentleman callers. (The novel is conspicuously silent about the austere intervening years Maggie spends as a teacher, which might certainly warrant attention given the narrator's supposed concern with her developing spirituality and quietism.)

The new earthly and sensual temptations Maggie experiences at the Deanes' are markers for her blossoming sexuality; rather than inaugurating a new set of wants and needs, her entrance into the Deane household merely betrays the perdurable nature of her early childish appetites: "she had slipped back into desire and longing: ... she found the image of the intense and varied life she yearned for, and despaired of, becoming more and more importunate" (374). This desire and longing, we are told, takes as one of its chief forms the craving for admiration: "Life was certainly very pleasant just now: it was becoming very pleasant ... to feel that she was one of the beautiful things of this spring-time. And there were admiring eyes always awaiting her now" (401).

This heightened sense of her own sexual attractiveness is accompanied by a heightened sense of her own bodily sensations generally; Maggie is fairly consumed, at the Deanes' house, with the enjoyment of music, which is persistently linked to primal and bodily processes: she often plays scales rather than melodies, in order to "taste more keenly ... the more primitive sensation of intervals" (401). Similarly, the enjoyment of music, and in particular the satisfaction of hearing intervals and chords, is explicitly described in sexual terms: "The sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment between the notes of the silvery soprano, from the perfect accord of descending thirds and fifths, from preconcerted loving chase of a fugue, is likely enough to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement" (368). A short time later, when we are told that Maggie has "little more power of concealing the impressions made upon her than if she had been constructed of musical strings" (410), we cannot help but read this as a statement about Maggie's *sexual* eagerness and impressionability.

And yet, as I insisted earlier, this newly kindled sexual longing is seen as a continuation of her childhood cravings, not as a new thing. As Lucy points out to Maggie, she has always been susceptible to the pleasures of attention: "'Why, dear Maggie,' she interposed, 'you have always pretended that you are too fond of being admired'" (377). She has Maggie's specific tastes in mind when preparing her room, filling it with prints, drawings, and flowers: "Maggie would enjoy

all that—she was so fond of pretty things!” (370). It seems as though Maggie’s tastes and cravings are no secret, regardless of the years of self-denial she has practiced. The intervening period of “renunciation” cannot break the continuity of Maggie’s yearning nature: her sexual attraction to Stephen is aligned with the wild appetites of her girlhood.

This persisting sense of Maggie’s putatively unreasonable desires—both her childish cravings for love and her “inappropriate” adult sexuality—foregrounds the question of demand and consumption that is banished from the economic plot of the Dodsons and Tullivers, where it exists only in its denial. The entire sexual/romantic narrative, as I have suggested, is a fantasy of the failure of Say’s Law. The real transgression of the “Maggie” plot of temptation and renunciation is the way it stages the confrontation between conflicting Victorian narratives of the trajectory of capitalism. Maggie’s monstrous appetites and her spectacular renunciation are deeply disturbing because they bring to light the repressed fear of the failure of Say’s Law; they reintroduce the question of demand into an economic equation that insists on its unimportance. If the function of the economic narrative of Tom and the Dodsons is to embody the striving, optimistic face of Victorian political economy (even as it unconsciously rehearses the possibility of failure and stagnation), then Maggie’s immoderate demands—and worse, her attempt to starve those demands—are a radically destabilizing influence on the narrative of progress and growth that the “Tom” plot sketches. It is Maggie’s sexual narrative—both her secret engagement to Philip Wakem and her precipitous flight with Stephen Guest—that *twice* directly threatens the economic plot Tom has so carefully managed.

One of the ways we can see this influence is in the persistent repetition of the concept of superfluity—indeed, in the repetition of the very word “superfluous”—in association with Maggie and her desires. In order to strengthen his resolve to call in his brother-in-law’s debt, as we saw earlier, Mr. Tulliver ruminates on the problematic existence of his sister: Gritty had “come into the world in that superfluous way characteristic of sisters” (77). Of course, we are explicitly told to read this entire episode as a metaphor for Tom’s feelings for Maggie (84); we are not, in any case, in need of much more evidence that Tom sees Maggie’s life as a troublesome burden to him and her appetites as dangerous and excessive: “You’re always in extremes ... and will not submit to be guided” (392). He also finds Maggie’s narrative impulse excessive and problematic as well; when Maggie falls into the irritating habit of making up little stories about the animals and insects they come across in their play, Tom registers his “profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie’s” by smashing an earwig “as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story” (99). It is unclear how destroying the subject of Maggie’s fanciful tale proves the tale unreal, but it is clear that it is her habit of make-believe and imaginative narrative that the prosaic Tom finds profoundly “superfluous.”

The source of this word can be found in one of the passages Eliot quotes from ã Kempis:

Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace.... Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations, and superfluous cares fly away; then shall immoderate fear leave thee, and inordinate love shall die. (290, Eliot's ellipsis)

The notion of cares—in the sense of desires as well as worries—being *superfluous* is, of course, at the root of Maggie's ethic of renunciation. (It is this very characterization that Philip protests when he says that there are "certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we *must* hunger after them" [303].) The advice of à Kempis promises Maggie a way to rid herself of what is "superfluous" or excessive, and it is indeed her sense of her own excessiveness from which she is in such desperate flight—the way of resignation is supposed to lead to the death of "inordinate love," the very thing tormenting her in the final volume of the novel. (In this sense, perhaps one could argue that Maggie did not, after all, misread à Kempis by hoping for the very end of desire instead of a peaceful resignation under its painful burden.)

The word "superfluous," with its etymological affinities to both "surplus" and the flood, links the economic plot of Tom, the renunciation plot of Maggie, and the anomalous ending of the novel. In the most obvious sense, the concept of surplus refers to the economic accumulation that is the driving force behind the capitalist system and Tom's plot of regeneration and striving. Yet, as I argue, this "optimistic" economic worldview represses the crucial question of demand—and it is the marginalized, "pessimistic" tale of the end of capitalism that fears both excessive accumulations of surplus and insufficient demand. By persistently displaying uncontrolled demands of all kinds—immoderate desires, unruly appetites, inordinate loves—and then ostentatiously renouncing those demands, Maggie simultaneously invokes the repressed side of the economic equation and explicitly raises the possibility that demand may fail, that surpluses may go unconsumed, that excesses may flood the delicate balance of the marketplace. Her real problem is that she attacks that balance on both sides, with her excessive wants and then her "unconsumed" superfluity. As Tom complains, she is "always in extremes," at one time, "tak[ing] pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial," at another, without even the "resolution to resist a thing that [she] know[s] to be wrong" (392-93).

But Maggie's excesses—of both kinds—are most strikingly evoked by the great flood that takes her life. Literally "superfluous," the flood waters seem supernatural as well, called into being by the very desires and torments of the novel's heroine. And it is also, ironically, the great flood that is so often criticized as excessive within the art and propriety of the novel itself; in this way, the superfluity of the Floss brings together the problems of economy, death, and closure that are at the heart of the novel. But in order to understand how the "excessive" ending of *The Mill on the Floss* illuminates the economic concerns I have already discussed, we need first to examine the curious way in which the very notion of death operates in the novel.

IV. Proper Funerals, Improper Closure, and Implausible Floods

Just as the uncertainty over competing accounts of capitalist growth in the nineteenth century inaugurates the anxiety about the end of capitalism we see operating in the novel, so does it bring a great deal of attention to bear on the question of balance sheets and deficits—how a plan of economy “turns out” in the end. The most consistently invoked balance sheet in the novel is, of course, the financial state of the Tullivers after the bankruptcy: the slow saving of the debt and the obsessive counting of sovereigns in the little tin box take on the solemnity of a religious rite. This concern with the familial ledger sheet is nearly always invoked in the context of Mr. Tulliver’s imminent demise. Mr. Tulliver’s real concern is that he and Tom pay off the creditors before his death, presumably—although apparently this is so obvious it need not be explained—because he wants to die an “honest” man. When the narrator first describes the agonizingly slow process of accumulating the precious sovereign coins and the “faint beam of pleasure” that the sight of them brings to Mr. Tulliver’s eyes, he also notes that the pleasure for the miller is “faint and transient, for it was soon dispelled by the thought that the time would be long—perhaps longer than his life—before the narrow savings could remove the hateful incubus of debt” (278). The uncertainty of the debt being paid before Tulliver’s death weighs heavily on both him and Tom; the latter attempts to encourage his father, “But perhaps you will live to see me pay everybody, father” (258), while the miller himself gloomily predicts, “But you’re like enough to bury me first” (350).

This fixation on the end-of-life balance sheet has a striking analogue in the Dodson sisters’ obsession with their own wills and funerals. In his descriptive catalogue of the familial characteristics, the narrator declares that, for the Dodsons, to “live respected, and have the proper bearers at your funeral, was an achievement of the ends of existence” (274). Of course, the only thing that can rival the proper funeral is the proper will; as the narrator goes on to say, the effect of the funeral would be nullified if “on the reading of your will, you sank in the opinion of your fellow-men, either by turning out to be poorer than they expected, or by leaving your money in a capricious manner, without strict regard to degrees of kin” (274). This strict kinship-code of money-leaving, a veritable hermeneutic of wills, is of momentous concern to the Dodsons, trumping almost every other consideration. Even after the great insult Mrs. Glegg suffers at the hands of her brother-in-law Tulliver, she does not consider for a moment trifling with this canon: “Mrs Glegg did not alter her will in consequence . . . for she had her principles. No one must be able to say of her when she was dead that she had not divided her money with perfect fairness among her own kin” (129).

The great principle of the will is paramount in the Dodsons’ ethical and economic universe; it overrides all the other concerns that are, in other contexts, of such great importance to the sisters: family feeling, profit, and propriety. When Mr. Glegg urges his wife to help the Tullivers after the bankruptcy, she sarcastically retorts: “and I’m to alter my will, or have a codicil made, and leave two or three hundred less behind me when I die” (214). (The irony of refusing to give

money to relatives so that there will be more to leave to those same relatives is also pointed out by Tom in this same scene [213].) Even when given a chance to make a tidy profit in the Laceham goods venture—and simultaneously help Tom—Mrs. Glegg rationalizes her reluctance by claiming that Tom will “see some day as his aunt’s in the right not to risk the money she’s saved for him till it’s proved as it won’t be lost” (319). And finally, the somewhat comical reason given for Mrs. Glegg’s support of Maggie after the abortive elopement is that “[l]ightly to admit conduct in one of your own family that would force you to alter your will, had never been the way of the Dodsons” (498-99). In each case, the unblinking focus on the metaphorical balance sheet of her life—the sum left behind her when she dies—keeps Mrs. Glegg from any other consideration, no matter how significant. The Dodsons’ obsession with wills and funerals depicts their view of death as a great final summing-up, a logical extension of a measured, prudent, and frugal life.

Unlike the Dodsons’ sensible and judiciously planned ends, death for Maggie is continuously figured as irrational and sudden. There are hints from the very beginning of the novel that Maggie may not follow the course her aunts have mapped out for themselves: her mother has a perpetual fear, we are told, that the young Maggie will meet an untimely death in the river and be “brought in dead and drowned some day” (103). The problem of drowning, both literal and metaphorical, is one which Maggie must contend with her whole life; even her effort to renounce Stephen is figured as “the convulsed clutch of a drowning man” (510).

In this potential for untimely, accidental death, Maggie contravenes, as we have seen, the mortal plan of the Dodsons. As the sisters complain at one point, the whole Tulliver family has gone far astray in this regard; the threat of sudden death is simply the culmination of a long and troubling plan of subversive economy: “There was never failures, nor lawing, nor wastefulness in our family—nor dying without wills.... No, nor sudden deaths” (455). This imminent threat is particularly associated with Maggie, of course, and her problematic conduct and immoderate desires; after she returns from her trip with Stephen, her mother allows herself one moment of complaint: “it’s gone from bad to worse, all of a sudden, just when the luck seemed on the turn” (501). It is her suddenness that unsettles those around her; the Maggie who is “always rushing extravagantly beyond” (344) what is proper and judicious would be just the kind of person to die an untimely death in some natural disaster. Maggie herself fears this propensity for bad timing as she tries to reach Tom with her boat during the “final rescue” on the flooded river: “Great God! there were floating masses in it, that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish too soon” (519). “Perishing” in general does not seem to be the issue here, but dying too soon certainly does—a curious concern given that minutes before she was lamenting, “But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy” (515).

What all of this rhetoric of timely and untimely death does, of course, is foreground the issue of narrative closure. Maggie’s death in the flood is so frequently deemed “inappropriate” not because it is an unseemly or unlikely way to die but

because it brings the novel to an unsatisfying, abrupt, or implausible end. What Maggie's vision of "the end" does, in fact, is challenge and subvert the Dodsons' notions of proper closure—just as she challenges and subverts their notions of political economy. The Dodsons and Tullivers have very definite ideas about proper closure writ large—how things (lives, destinies, stories) should end in a seemingly, prudent, and frugal way. Maggie is much more concerned with feeling than she is with appropriateness; she sentimentalizes the version of proper endings given by her family and in so doing reinscribes the conflict between passion and propriety already at work in the novel's depiction of political economy.

The Dodsons and Tullivers worry about things ending both too late and too soon. We have already seen the way in which Mr. Tulliver fears dying before his debts are paid; in a comic reversal of this fear, his wife frets that all her "best things" will be sold "into strange people's houses" and "wore out before I'm dead" (203). Tom evinces his own anxiety about timely endings when he wonders about his choice of future career and, by extension, the viability of his own projected narrative of striving and repayment: "there seemed so little tendency towards a conclusion in the quiet monotonous procedure of these sleek, prosperous men of business" (227). What the Dodsons and Tullivers really seem to fear is the possible failure of convergence between things that should, ideally, all end at the same time: to live on past the lives of your tablecloths, to die while still in debt, to be stuck "writing ... for ever to the loud ticking of a time-piece" (227) while commercial opportunity passes you by—these are the horrors of improper closure that the Dodsons envision.

This failure of convergence, the fear of improper ends, is felt by the Dodsons as a very real and painful possibility. After Maggie loses control and shouts at her aunts for not helping the family in their bankruptcy, Mrs. Tulliver is faced with this acute fear: "Mrs Tulliver was frightened; there was something portentous in this mad outbreak; she did not see how life could go on after it" (215). The poignancy of this description is quite striking; Mrs. Tulliver, for all her pathetically narrow little concerns, is quite sensitive to the possibility of tragedy in Maggie's "portentous" outburst. It is the finality and melodrama of the eruption that raises the specter of an untimely or improper end; it seems as though everything must likewise come to an end, that life cannot go on after it. We are similarly alerted to the real stakes of proper closure in the passage that describes Mr. Tulliver's borrowing money from Wakem's client, the decisive act that will eventually place the mill in the hands of his bitter enemy: "Mr Tulliver had a destiny as well as *Ædipus*" (130). The narrator sees fit, in these passages, to remind us that the issue of endings is no small or unimportant matter; the story of the Tullivers has possibilities for real tragedy, a tragedy that may be caused—rather than merely described—by an untimely or improper closure.

This ideal of proper convergence in closure is metaphorically echoed by the image of the river; for all rivers, we are assured, there is "the same final home" (402), a melding of waters where the "loving tide" meets the hurrying, onrushing current (7). Unfortunately, this reassurance does little to alleviate the threat of untimely closure in the novel; for it is Maggie's destiny that is likened to the river in this passage—not that of *Ædipus*—and it is her destiny, of course, that poses

the problem for proper closure to begin with. (It almost goes without saying that it is the river itself that brings about that very destiny and untimely end.)

Maggie poses a problem for this vision of proper closure throughout the narrative; just as the flood is relentlessly foreshadowed throughout the novel, so Maggie is persistently figured as a threat to the Dodsonian ideal of convergence. She subverts and reverses her family's striving for proper endings at every turn. In a telling outburst, Maggie echoes her mother's concern that the family would not have their possessions about them when they die; however, for her, it is a question of sentiment rather than of propriety: "the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!" (239). This tendency to sentimentalize the notion of closure is also present in her oft-cited rejection of Philip's copy of *Corinne*:

"I didn't finish the book," said Maggie. "As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that the light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness." (332)

Maggie not only predicts the ending of the novel ("I foresaw"), but recognizes its lack of satisfaction—lack of propriety—for her own perspective. (It is quite striking how Maggie anticipates not merely the end of her own story, but also the critical reaction to the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* itself.) Maggie's sentimental reading refuses the strictures of closure; she feels fit to reread and to rewrite the ending of the tale based on her own romantic agenda.

Maggie's tendency to sentimentalize, rewrite, and subvert the imperatives of closure also leads her to a certain blindness to causation, an ignorance of narrative movement. She herself signals this propensity when she expresses envy of Tom, who has "something to do on which he could fix his mind with a steady purpose" (288): Tom is able to adhere strictly to linear development, to the forward movement of narrative tending to a proper end. It is, of course, the "economic" narrative on which Tom's mind is fixed that Maggie envies; as she laments to Philip, she wishes she could make for herself "a world outside [loving], as men do" (413). The first type of narrative adheres to strict causal development, a proper end, and "steady purpose," while the second leads only to tragedy and "sudden deaths." This lack of purpose is likewise indicated in the passage about Maggie's destiny we examined earlier. The metaphorical river of Maggie's fate is "at present hidden" and "unmapped," and while it may eventually lead, in the broadest possible sense, to the "same final home" (all novels end just as all people die), it is nonetheless dangerously uncertain and perhaps out of control: "Under the charm of her new pleasures, Maggie herself was ceasing to think ... of her future lot" (402).

It is, as this last quotation indicates, the sexual nature of the "Maggie" plot, combined with the inordinate appetites of its heroine, that lends it this improper character, this uncertain movement, this threat of an untimely end. The pleasures of romantic attraction are figured as exclusive of a reading of narrative movement or an awareness of closure: "Each was oppressively conscious of the other's

presence, even to the finger-ends.... Neither of them had begun to reflect on the matter, or silently to ask, "To what does all this tend?" (403).

In fact, the problem of Maggie's mis- (or non-) reading can be seen, generally, as an effect of the "romantic" or "sexual" narrative and its idiosyncratic hermeneutic (endings are ignored, meanings conveyed silently, feelings signaled through musical chords, etc.). This way of reading bleeds over, for Maggie, into its attempted opposite: the sexual narrative is, in a profound way, hopelessly entangled with the plan of renunciation—not set over against it. Just as I argued that the problem with Maggie's program of self-denial is that it merely recapitulates her great appetites ("Maggie was still panting for happiness" [291]), so she conflates the implications of the separate narratives of romantic fulfillment and renunciation. Both are immoderate, both are attempts after-pleasure, neither is the result of "judgment and self-command" (392). In a crucial moment, Maggie even reads the two central texts of her alternative destinies in the same way. She "reads" Stephen's pleading missive ("She did not *read* the letter: she heard him uttering it") the same way she had "read" à Kempis (she was "hardly conscious that she was reading—seeming rather to listen while a low voice said—") (514, 290).²⁸ Even the great *summa* of the novel, the justification for all her striving toward self-abnegation—"In their death they were not divided" (522)—has already been echoed by Stephen Guest in his proposal in the boat: "let us never go home again—till no one can part us" (465).

Under the pressure of her own great desires, Maggie is continuously led into acts of misreading (or rather, acts of non-reading), moments where her ability to foresee the end of her own "narrative" is forestalled or foreclosed. This striking inability—in one with such a facility for language and reading—is a result of her confusion of the implications of the narrative of sexual fulfillment with those of the narrative of renunciation and self-denial. And it is, of course, this very confusion that I have argued is so deeply threatening to the Victorian economic worldview of the other characters. Maggie confuses the imperatives of striving and starving—the optimistic and pessimistic Victorian narratives of capitalism—and in so doing foregrounds the problem of demand repressed elsewhere in the novel, and in the culture generally. Her subversion of proper closure is part of this general problem: while the "Tom" plot has no trouble marching blithely forward, with "steady purpose," toward its proper end, the "Maggie" plot continuously ignores the imperatives of forward movement and proper closure and unconsciously subverts the entire project of narrative propriety. Thus her spectacular death—her much-maligned elimination—is metaphorically linked to her inappropriate demand. She dies and becomes the agent of Tom's death in order to resolve the tensions inaugurated by her great and improper desires. She is the victim not so much of her self-denial or of her appetites alone, as of her confusion of the two; the economic imperatives of the novel require and bring about her elimination and that of her threatening desires and even more threatening self-abnegation. It is, after all, not the unrestrained, symbolically

²⁸ Apparently, I am in excellent company here. It was recently brought to my attention that Neil Hertz remarks on this same parallel in his brilliant analysis of the novel, "George Eliot's Life-in-Debt" (67-68).

sexual waters of the flood that kill her, but rather the giant pieces of industrial machinery broken free of their moorings and rushing down the river. She is sacrificed to the "ingenious machine" of optimistic capitalism, "which performs its work with much regularity [and] is guilty towards the rash man who, venturing too near it, is caught up by some fly-wheel or other, and suddenly converted into unexpected mince-meat" (247).

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