



Bodies Once Again

Terry Eagleton

Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748–1818

Ruth Perry

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The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel

Catherine Gallagher

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If you open a history of the world at random, you will find it making three claims about whatever period you happen upon: it was a time of rapid change; it was essentially an age of transition; and the middle classes went on rising. Like the sun, or the cost of housing in Dublin, rising is what the middle classes are eternally destined to do. It is as natural to them as falling is to American TV evangelists.

It is true that in today's late bourgeois society, with its jobbers, media moguls, computer nerds and open-neck-shirted CEOs, the traditional *bürgerlich* class — the kind of solid, cultivated, eminently reputable types who populate the pages of Thomas Mann — have risen without trace. By the mid-eighteenth century in England, however, they had entrenched an aggressively new culture of individualism; and the effects of this on domestic life are what Ruth Perry's superbly erudite *Novel Relations* is mostly about.

What Perry has in her critical sights is the Whiggish, dewy-eyed fable of historians like Lawrence Stone, for whom the eighteenth century witnessed a new form of cosy, intimate, 'companionate' marriage, a deepened affectivity that elevated the status of women. The narrative Perry herself has to deliver is rather grimmer. As far as the role of women goes, there was indeed a tectonic shift in the age of Enlightenment; but it was one from father patriarchy to

husband patriarchy — from kinship defined as consanguinity to kinship defined by conjugality. If marriage moves centre stage in social and literary thought, it is not because men and women have finally learned how to love their spouses (least of all from reading romantic novels), but because there were social forces abroad that ensured that you could rely less and less on the family into which you were born.

In earlier historical periods, it is by no means clear that marriage was seen as the most important kin connection, even (when compared with sisterhood or daughterhood) in the case of women; now, however, women were mostly to be defined in relation to their husbands and children. In the seventeenth century, Perry argues, individual desire was rarely distinguished from the good of the community; you might resist the spouse your parents tried to foist on you, but only with the support of local public opinion. An adult female was defined at least as much

G. M. Rossetti
untitled (women painting
patterns on printed calico in
the Wetter Brothers' factory,
Orange, France)
c. 1764
oil on canvas
size n/a
The Art Archive/Musée
Municipal Orange/Dagli
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by work, property and motherhood as by sex or marriage. Later, however, a husband's love — a fragile enough commodity, to be sure — came to be a woman's only law and protection. As daughters were redefined as strangers-in-the-house or potential émigrés, fathers took less responsibility for them and mothers began to feel more competitive with them. As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, a work that prefigures Perry's case but which she acknowledges, glancingly, only once, the 'deployment of alliance' gave way to the 'deployment of sexuality' in kinship systems.

This bold, essentially simple, thesis, one which should be distinguished from the banal claim that the period saw the growth of the 'nuclear' family, is the fulcrum on which *Novel Relations* turns; and it manages to hold a vast array of disparate materials deftly together. If the book is capacious in scope, it is agreeably tight in conceptual focus. In eighteenth-century England, so Perry argues, the meaning of the term 'family' was undergoing a seismic change. An axis of kinship based on consanguineal ties or blood lineage was gradually yielding ground to one centred on the conjugal couple; and the chief battleground between consanguinity and conjugality was the figure of the daughter. Women were forced to sacrifice what power and status they derived from their family of origin to the narrower, more unstable, less protected status of loving spouse; and the conflicts between these antithetical roles form much of the stuff of eighteenth-century fiction. There is, Perry considers, an 'intense anxiety about family membership' in this troubled condition, one which Jane Austen (who creates the *locus classicus* of sister-wife conflict in *Sense and Sensibility*) cannily avoided herself by the simple device of never marrying. As often, the function of the novel here is essentially strategic or therapeutic: it provides a vital way of working through painful social contradictions, in what Perry sees as a world being rapidly transformed by market

forces, urban anonymity and the spread of literacy. In the course of her book, then, all three history-of-the-world axioms are triumphantly confirmed (it was, she informs us in addition, 'an age of great social mobility and class instability'), which is no more than one might expect.

There is a broader background to this change in family fortunes, which it is no part of Perry's brief to investigate. With the emergence of what was only fairly recently dubbed 'modernity', the symbolic dimension of human affairs (religion, art and sexuality) is increasingly divorced from the socio-economic, shifted from the public sphere to some more private, peripheral status. This, like most aspects of modernity, represents both loss and gain — a Janus-faced view of modernity that only Marxism, for which the great epoch of the rising bourgeoisie is simultaneously a story of breathtaking liberation and an unspeakable nightmare, has managed to sustain in our own dismally undialectical times. It is a view as inimical to nostalgic anti-modernists as it is to those post-modernists who leap to their state-of-the-art computers to denounce the very notion of progress. It is distasteful alike to the callow avant-gardists for which the past is merely a tale of oppression to be transcended, and the cultural mandarins for whom the present is one long, lamentable degeneration from it.

Both camps abandon the notion of the past as a potentially revolutionary force. It is not dreams of liberated grandchildren that drive men and women to revolt, Walter Benjamin wisely observed, but memories of enslaved ancestors. Nationalists are more likely to be mindful of this truth than most; it is just that their problem is finding a way of utilizing the past that does not fetishize it. Modernity is likely to appear equivocal in their eyes, since if it signifies the forces that oppress them, it also furnishes them with some of the instruments for resisting it. Eighteenth-century individualism, *Novel Relations* argues, was similarly doubled-edged. If it

William Hogarth
Marriage à-la-Mode: 1. The Marriage Settlement
 c. 1743
 oil on canvas
 90.8 x 69.9 cm
 National Gallery, London



allowed every man to be king of his castle, it curtailed the autonomy of women. Market capitalism liberated men, but deprived women of community support.

Because of its colonial status, Ireland lived through the divorce between the symbolic and socio-economic fairly belatedly. Religion was hardly a private option: it remained a formidable public institution well into the twentieth century, second in power only to the state and considerably more authoritative. The narrative of the metropolitan nation, in which religion evolves from Protestant inwardness to private pastime, did not apply so forcibly here. While art in Britain was an affair of market forces, in nineteenth-century Ireland it remained locked firmly into the political sphere, as it is in most nationalist cultures. As for sexuality and the family, we are dealing less with the erotic or affective than with a pre-modern world of dowries and matchmakers. It is less a question of Jamesian intricacies or

Lawrentian intensities than of birth rates, labour requirements, emigration, impartible inheritance, welfare provision, clerical regulation, enforced celibacy and the like.

In the directness of relation between cultural forms and material forces, colonial societies lend themselves admirably to vulgar Marxism. One has only to consider the historical coincidence of the United Irishmen with Thomas Moore, the rise of the first Catholic novelists alongside Daniel O'Connell, the conveniently synchronous deaths of James Clarence Mangan and a million famine victims, the co-existence of the Literary Revival with the decline and fall of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the near-miraculous simultaneity of James Joyce's *Portrait* with the Easter Rising and of *Ulysses* with the birth of the Free State, the emergence of the first major Catholic dramatists after political independence (the Protestantism of Sean O'Casey was a historical oversight), and the legendary twinning of the Northern poets and the

Troubles, to recognize that nothing of this could be other than providential.

Privatization, of course, can be progressive. With the consummation of modernity, the church pew, marital bedroom and artist's studio are absolved from the more brutal sort of state invigilation. Art can become critique, while religion and sexuality are nobody's business but your own. But this, needless to say, is just what is so anaemic and impoverished about them. The symbolic domain can give power the slip only at the price of progressive irrelevance.

Novel Relations, by contrast, examines an aspect of the transition from traditional to modern that remains firmly within the political sphere. We are not speaking here of any simple-minded shift from public to private. If 'love' increasingly conquers 'money' when it comes to marriage, it does so in ways which express an individualistic drive for economic independence. Affection and economy are not yet the polarities they will come to appear in some major currents of Romanticism. The family is one of those curious institutions (Fox TV and the Church of England are others) that in classical Marxist terms belong simultaneously to base and superstructure, reproducing labour power and ideological values at the same time.

Women, so Perry's thesis runs, lost power in their natal families; and though they might retrieve some social clout in their conjugal set-ups, the net result was a disinheritance of daughters. It is a compulsively repeated plot line in the fiction of the period. A woman born into a powerful family might shed the benefits of that status when she married. Inhabiting two domestic systems simultaneously, poised on the thresholds of both, daughters were the chief units of exchange between the consanguineal kin group and the conjugal economy. Women's autonomy as wives and mothers may have been more limited than it had been as sisters and daughters. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*

Harlowe, for example, enjoys considerable independence in her natal family (she has a dairy-house of her own), before being thrown in the path of the villainous Lovelace. The novels of the day, Perry considers, were obsessed by father-daughter relationships, in a surge of literary nostalgia for the time when young women, now at the mercy of their husbands, could turn to their progenitors for guidance and solace. The relationship of sisters, another constant literary focus, represents the claims of blood kin in its purest form, 'uncomplicated by the seductions of wealth, power, or the right of succession'. Fictional images of sibling intimacy, Perry argues, are symptomatic responses to its declining significance in society at large.

Brothers are key figures too, since only they could compete with husbands for the love of a woman. Indeed, the profoundly conservative *Mansfield Park* privileges the brother-sister bond above all other affinities. Elder brothers in eighteenth-century novels are often spoiled, arrogant, profligate types, just as older sisters tend to be vain and younger ones giddy; but an idealized version of the chastity-protecting good brother stages its appearance in scores of eighteenth-century tales, as what is decreasingly possible in life is still viable in art. As men came to think of themselves as at their best in the role of brothers, brotherhood became idealized as the kin position *par excellence*, and was accordingly ripe for conversion at a later historical point to a revolutionary political concept.

The theoretical birth of children, generally known as the 'invention of childhood', accompanied the new focus on conjugality; and this in turn necessitated the invention of a new kind of motherhood, desexualized and sentimentalized, to feed and clothe these emergent cultural constructs. Previously, English culture had not particularly venerated the notion of maternity. Yet the actual power of mothers dwindled throughout the century,

which may be one reason for their notorious absence in the fiction of the period. Aunts and other maternal substitutes act instead as counsellors to anxious, isolated young married women. Meanwhile, sexuality was redefined as a cardinal sin, a special weakness requiring special vigilance, while the commodification of women as sexual objects grew to the point where it became well-nigh impossible for anyone reflecting on the condition of women to mention wives without mentioning prostitutes, or vice versa. Commodified social relations were replacing older kin and communal obligations.

Novel Relations, as that last sentence might suggest, is something of a Fall narrative. It is hard to close the book without feeling a faint twinge of nostalgia for the good old days of consanguineal patriarchy, when woman had more male oppressors and not just one male to protect them. Since deteriorationist fables, however, are almost always truer than ameliorative ones, the human animal being what it is, the account rings a good deal more plausibly than Lawrence Stone's, whose study of the family, sex and marriage in early modern England had the distinction of being discredited almost as soon as it fell from the press. Perry has done her historical spadework, and provides us with plausible reasons for the transition in question. These changes in the family were for the most part functions of economic individualism, which repositioned women with respect to their families of origin. If lineal kinship gradually ousted the collateral variety in law, it is because patrilineal inheritance reinforced the accumulation of property within families and undercut its wider distribution. Legal changes funnelled more domestic resources to the elder son to supply him with a stake in the new competitive economy, diminishing the portions of the other siblings and leaving women in particular at a disastrous disadvantage. Marriage as an alliance of kin groups provided a means to class mobility and the amassing of property. State policies

tended to recognize the rights of marital kin over natural kin. Primogeniture and patrimony turn out to be the villains of the piece. Alarming enough, it begins to sound as though the Marxists may have been right after all.

This steady material preoccupation is one of *Novel Relation's* signal strengths — not least in a United States where even the Left is coy of the word 'capitalism', and one current of feminism sniffily regards any talk of production as 'economistic'. (Curiously, however, they do not regard their own culturalism as equally reductive.) The study is not of that dispiriting school of North American feminist criticism that treats gender in stark isolation from other social factors, a partiality that has much to do with the dearth of a socialist culture in such societies. It is not in the least unusual to stumble across American feminists today who support the despicably opportunistic warmonger Hillary Clinton, just as the Irish feminist who can see no more in republicanism than a tiresome virility complex and whose politics on everything but the issue of gender are impeccably Dublin 4, is a drearily familiar figure. One of the most splendid consequences of the global decline of Marxism is that we can no longer be accused by feminists of 'appropriating' their concerns, since we are scarcely any longer thick enough on the ground to do so. They, instead, are most welcome to appropriate ours, if they have a mind to. Ruth Perry is not exactly a Marxist; but she is not in the least shy of discerning the destructive impetus of early modern capitalism at the root of the dislocating and demoting of the eighteenth-century heroine.

A publisher's note to this vastly learned, strikingly original study describes the book as using social history to examine literary texts. In fact, it does more or less the opposite. Its author is remarkably well versed in the kind of utterly obscure eighteenth-century novels that one devoutly



Andrés de Santa María
El lavadero sobre el Sena
 c. 1887
 oil on screen
 200 x 302 cm
 The Art Archive/Museo
 Nacional de Colombia en
 Bogota/Dagli Orti

hopes one will never have to read oneself; but she treats them almost exclusively as historical documentation, not as literary artefacts. This is the kind of method that gets us materialists a bad name. Perry speaks of trying to read the ‘unconscious’ of literary texts, but she actually gets up to nothing so sophisticated. Aside from a comment or two on genre, her approach throughout is to stare resolutely through literary form in order to plunder novels of their social content. The closest she comes to any more intricate approach is to point out that the fictions she deals with are not always a direct reflection of real life — a point she rather spoils by surrendering to the post-modern neurosis of placing the phrase ‘real life’ in scare quotes.

There are a few microscopic flaws. ‘Duel’ is not a transitive verb, at least not in English-English, and one is envious of someone else’s eminence, not jealous of it. Perry should not confirm the stereotype of the nation as an irony-free zone by overlooking a blatant

example of the figure in a quotation from *A Sentimental Journey*, though she does compensate somewhat for this fault by entitling a chapter on incest ‘Family Feeling’. Nor should she give comfort to trendy epistemological sceptics by placing the word ‘true’ in scare quotes. Such miniscule blemishes apart, *Novel Relations* will surely prove a seminal, immensely authoritative text for any future discussion of eighteenth-century letters and social history; though more — much more — with regard to the latter than the former.



In the 1970s and 1980s, it was advisable to include the word ‘Dialectics’ or ‘Dynamics’ in your title if you wished to get your book published. These days, the requisite buzz word is ‘Body’. In fact, there will soon be more bodies in contemporary criticism than on the fields of Waterloo. Mangled members, tormented torsos, bodies emblazoned or incarcerated, disciplined or desirous: all this,

no doubt, can be laid at the door of Michel Foucault, for whom bodies were a way of talking about human subjects without going all soggly subjective. With his well-nigh pathological aversion to subjectivity, which, obtusely, he could see as nothing but self-repression, the later Foucault discovered in the notion of the body, a discourse of the self which could remain resolutely external to anything as messily humanistic as psychology or emotion. It is ironic in this respect that the cult of the body was then hijacked by feminist critics whose interest, quite properly, lay precisely in this marshy terrain, far removed from the virile, self-grooming gymnastics of the French philosopher himself.

There are, however, more bodies than one. On the whole, it has proved acceptable to speak of the sexual or reproductive body, but not of the labouring one. Disciplined, monstrous or imprisoned bodies have been granted the Foucaultean imprimatur, but not for the most part sick or suffering ones. Such partisanship is one reason among many to applaud the appearance of Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic*, with its refreshing reminder that there is a zone of production as well as a realm of reproduction.

In a stunningly innovative gesture, Gallagher points out that the thin-blooded political economists and the warm-hearted Romantic organicists of early nineteenth-century Britain had a good deal more in common than is generally supposed. Both, after all, dealt in life, energy, sensation, nature and corporeality. Utilitarian political economy is a eudemonic doctrine, all about pains and pleasures, appetencies and aversions, desire and depletion, life and death. Nations must store up great reserves of vigour and sensation, which is really just another name for wealth, and sluice these energies out again in production or consumption; but sufficient reserves could only be stored up if expenditure was restricted, which meant

withholding present enjoyment and releasing more pain than pleasure into the system. It is not a doctrine the citizens of advanced capitalism, as opposed to the industrial variety, would greet with much enthusiasm.

In this sense, political economy shares a vitalistic basis with the discourse that contests it most hotly from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to I. A. Richards: the aesthetic, which (as Gallagher might have pointed out) begins life in a work of 1750 by Alexander Baumgarten as a discourse of the body — of perception and sensation — not of art. Since there are few keener sensations than starvation, and since it is not hard to see the nation's economy as an organic system of vital energy, aesthetics and political economy share a naturalistic source. Behind the book's preoccupation with the circulation of energies, one can dimly hear the dying strains of the new historicism.

Gallagher even manages the improbable feat of rescuing Thomas Malthus from the enormous condescension of the literati. In fact, the critic of copulation begins to sound positively sexy. She shows just what a sensual materialist he was, and how this scandalized his more loftily idealist critics. Malthus, like the work of some of his high-minded Romantic castigators, is all about feeling — but in his case, about the miseries and fleshly enjoyments of the poor, pleasure and happiness, energies and aversions, the productivity or sterility of bodily life. The moral perfectionists, he considered, were hostile to the just claims of the body, and David Ricardo's preoccupation with exchange-value discounts, in his view, the fact that political economy is rooted in the collective material needs of labouring bodies. Economic actors strive in the end for the maximizing of their pleasurable sensations. Malthus, Gallagher observes, was the originator of the very sentiments that John Ruskin thought of as *anti-Malthusian* in his reflections on economic and bodily health. Like Ruskin, he valued

above all those commodities that are most easily reconverted into flesh, and deplored Adam Smith's failure to distinguish among commodities on the basis of their biological value. Much of this somatic theorizing flows from the labour theory of value; and the notion of labour as coercive or unpleasant work provides Gallagher with a link between the aesthetician Edmund Burke, for whom the pain of labour is a form of sublimity, and the political economist's conclusion that pain, in the sense of disagreeable work, is the source of value. Burke's aesthetics, Gallagher remarks, rest on the same groundwork of vitalist physiology as Smith's economics.

It is not hard to see novels as stored up energy and sensation, awaiting their release by the act of reading; and where Gallagher's book has the edge over Perry's is in this attention to the forms and performances of fiction themselves, rather than simply to their content. Even so, she does a scintillating job on that as well. In an eye-opening account of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, she asks why a novel that protests against the industrial grind should have been dedicated to Thomas Carlyle, champion of hard labour (and even of slavery), while lambasting the Benthamites, who shared Dickens's view that labour is disagreeable and denied it any divine glory. 'Aversion', Jeremy Bentham wrote, 'is the emotion, the only emotion, which *labour*, taken by itself, is qualified to produce' — a sentiment in which many of us would heartily concur. The only good reason for welcoming communism, for example, is that it means not having to do any work. Marxism is for the indolent, not the strenuous. If Ruskin, William Morris and their honourable progeny sought to humanize labour, Marx sought to abolish it. In this sense, he is closer to Oscar Wilde than to Morris. It was Wilde who believed that one could lie around all day in loose-fitting purple garments and be one's own communist society.

If *Hard Times* is about fruitless labour, this is also in Gallagher's view a fair description of the act of reading it. The novel 'cranks out life stories with deadening regularity and utter indifference ... powerless to produce or even anticipate enjoyment at the end of its own process'. It is the novel's notorious 'lack of play' that catches Gallagher's astute critical eye. Even the famous circus, Dickens's only apparent alternative to the oppressive factories of Coketown, is a soulless kind of factory in itself, as the performers are portrayed as well-disciplined workers and the narrative consequently undercuts the work/play antithesis it has so simple-mindedly set up.

The highpoint of the book, however, is a chapter on the bioeconomics of *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel that might have been written especially to confirm Gallagher's thesis. In its portrayal of the trade in corpses in the Thames and garbage recycled into wealth, it is all about the circulation of bodies, organic and inorganic processes, life plucked from death, Nature as both regenerating and laying waste. There is also a chapter which boldly illuminates George Eliot's debt to W. Stanley Jevons and marginal utility theory in, of all things, *Daniel Deronda*, and a Malthusian reading of her *Scenes of Clerical Life*. No doubt a revisionist Malthus international summer school will soon be in full swing. Ireland, home of both famine and revisionism, might offer a particularly appropriate home for it.

Dublin, however, would be appropriate for another reason as well. For it was home in the nineteenth century to a school of political economy that does not figure in this study, yet which is mightily relevant to it. Political economy in Ireland, given the state of the nation, was from the outset interwoven with ethical, cultural and political motifs, just as what E. P. Thompson used to call a 'moral economy', with its infrastructure of tacit rights and unwritten obligations, still exerted some

authority in the Irish countryside. It proved impossible to distinguish the study of economic institutions from the cultural and political question of British colonialism. Political economy in Ireland worked within a general humanistic context, in which discussions of rent or land tenure could scarcely be dissociated from matters of custom, value and sentiment. It was also clear to the Irish, as it was not by and large to the British, just how culturally specific the so-called universal economic laws of Smith, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill actually were. Their own culturally different situation thus allowed them to put some intellectual daylight between themselves and the Ricardians.

Issac Butt, lawyer, novelist and politician, was spurred into economic discourse as a nationalist by the Whig *laissez-faire* response to the Famine. The great John Elliot Cairnes, economic counsellor to Mill, saw political economy as the science of well-being, rejected grand teleological narratives in typically colonial fashion, and insisted on the role of cultural peculiarities in economic life. A critic of *laissez-faire*, he was outraged by the wretched condition of the small farmers, and spoke up for so-called peasant proprietorship long before it became a nationalist mantra. He is best known outside Ireland for his *The Slave Power*, a passionate indictment of American slavery that made him illustrious in his own time. Thomas Cliffe Leslie, a neglected figure ripe for retrieval, also returned political economy to its moral and historical context, and argued what we might now call a culturalist case against the naturalism and universalism of economic orthodoxy. He also drew attention to the overlooked role of the family in his discipline and, like Cairnes, stressed the epistemological opacities and instabilities of any discourse that sought to determine human needs and desires. John

Kells Ingram, a card carrying Comtean, considered that his subject should be as much a study of historical *mentalités* as of the history of production, and to illustrate the point, he wrote a historicizing account of the rise and fall of economic theories. Economy must not be treated in isolation from culture and morality. He also saw ancient slavery as progressive and spoke out against secondary education for the working class, but nobody's work is perfect.

It was Sigmund Freud who remarked in his customarily cynical way that economic necessity was the only reason we were not permanently indolent. Without the goad of economic coercion, we would simply lie around the place all day in various interesting postures of *jouissance*. Freud was deeply wary of Marxism; but he, like Marx, believed that the economic was the ultimately determinant force in human affairs. Were it not for the need to labour, the pleasure principle could have its own sweet way. Freud is an economist of the psyche, whose work is all about labour and expenditure, storage and release, repression and circulation, investment and disinvestment, pain and pleasure, desire and death. He is, then, the obvious inheritor of the lineage this book traces, even though the book seems to be unaware of it. Gallagher might also have looked more closely than she does at Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in which (at an outrageously early age) the young former Hegelian seeks with breathtaking ambitiousness to argue his way up from the sensuous body to an ethics and politics. If communism is essential for Marx — if the sensuous particularity of use-value must be liberated from the abstract prison-house of exchange-value — it is, among other things, so that we might begin to experience our bodies once again. ■