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“This Immense Expense of Art”: George Eliot and John Ruskin on Consumption and the Limits of Sympathy

EMILY COIT

“MY own money buys me nothing but an uneasy conscience,” frets the heroine of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871).¹ But the novel in which Dorothea’s uneasiness about money features so centrally also expresses a political conservatism that prefers to preserve rather than redistribute concentrations of accumulated wealth. Critics have discussed George Eliot’s conservatism at length; in this essay I attempt to better our understanding of it by examining a body of ideas about consumption and moral obligation that she and John Ruskin share.² I use a discussion of consumer ethics to explore

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¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 364. Subsequent references in the text refer to this edition.

² Most analyses of Eliot’s politics have focused on *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). See Linda Bamber, “Self-Defeating Politics in George Eliot’s *Felix Holt*,” *Victorian Studies*, 18 (1975), 419–35; Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988); Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago

the moral logic of Eliot's and Ruskin's conservatism by examining the role of the aesthetic within it. Economic consumption and the aesthetic are subjects inextricably connected, not just because the discourses of political economy and aesthetics have a shared origin in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, but also because the discourse of aesthetics has long served to legitimize select modes and acts of consumption.³ To discuss money and art in the same breath is perfectly natural from the Ruskinian perspective that sees society as an organic unity of interdependent parts, a system within which beauty, creative production, governance, and commercial exchange are not separable matters.

Eliot's similar perception of society as an interconnected web allows her, like Ruskin, to see consumption as a mode of interacting with other human beings and thus a crucial site for moral thought and action. She addresses the question of how to spend money because that question is one formulation of a larger and more general problem: how are we to balance our own needs and desires with those of others? Eliot advocates a moral awareness that makes one sensitive to the pain of others

Press, 1985); Nancy Henry, "George Eliot and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 138–58; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958); and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 18 (1985), 126–44.

³ John Guillory exposes the shared origins of these two discourses "separated at birth," and shows that idea of the "work of art" has its historical beginnings in "the uneasiness of the first consumer society with the lack of any systematic regulation of consumption" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993], pp. 303, 307). Eighteenth-century moral philosophers, he writes, found in the idea of taste "a means of checking the greed and social irresponsibility which were historically associated with 'luxury,' with uncontrolled consumption" (*Cultural Capital*, p. 307). For more on the relation between the discourses of aesthetics and political economy, see Regenia Gagnier's study of their parallel development during the nineteenth century, and Mary Poovey's account of the formation of literary and economic genres (see Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000]; and Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008]). For valuable political histories of the aesthetic, see Guillory, *Cultural Capital*; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990); and Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994).

up until the point where—as when we hear the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat—such awareness becomes intolerable and counterproductive. For her the selfishness that causes excessive or improper consumption is the selfishness that comes from the numbing of that moral awareness. The treatment of consumption in *Middlemarch*, I argue, is an important articulation of Eliot’s moral thought. It is also an attempt to address the great unresolved problem within her moral program: if it is untenable to feel sympathy for every person at every moment, then where can we in good conscience let sympathy stop? Eliot suggests that aesthetic pleasure can make consumption morally defensible, but she also anticipates Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of the aesthetic: her novel represents both the display of cultural capital and the exercise of the aesthetic disposition as ways of maintaining social and economic hierarchies.⁴ She thus at once critiques and participates in the system within which the aesthetic functions to preserve social and political stasis.

Eliot and Ruskin write in the context of an industrial society in which consumption has rapidly increasing social and economic importance. One of Ruskin’s prescient strokes as an economic writer is to adopt a framework of abundance rather than scarcity, and thus to direct attention to the problem of consumption rather than production; in doing so, he presages both the accelerating spread of consumer culture and the insights of

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu’s studies of class, habitus, and distinction are part of a robust body of literature on the social significance of consumer objects and behaviors; see Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984). Thorstein Veblen’s analysis in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) of emulative spending and “conspicuous consumption” focuses, like Bourdieu’s work, on the ways consumption relates to status and power; see in particular his comments on aesthetics and consumption in Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin, 1994), pp. 126–35. Jean Baudrillard’s work on consumer culture and consumer society describes a “system of objects” in which commodities function as signs; see Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998); and Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 2006). Mary Douglas describes the significative function of consumer goods in a far more positive light; she sees consumer objects as an “information system” that humans use to communicate effectively. See in particular Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 37–66; and Mary Douglas, “The Consumer’s Revolt,” in *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), pp. 106–25.

the marginal revolution.⁵ Unlike the neoclassical economists of that movement, however, Ruskin objects vociferously to the fundamental premises of the science he discusses: most significant, he objects to the abstraction of economic questions in isolation from moral concerns and social realities.⁶ Ruskin redefines the basic terms of the science in order to reintegrate them into that human matrix. In this strategy we can see an analogue of Karl Polanyi's concept of an "embedded" economy that is subordinate to social concerns rather than autonomous from them.⁷ Ruskin shares with Karl Marx and Marxist thinkers a theory of value based in labor and an interest in the conditions of production; in "The Nature of Gothic" (1853) Ruskin presents the clearest articulation of his belief that *all* labor should be creative labor, and that in a healthy society art production is indistinct from production at large. Ruskin's concern for the quality of workers' lives, however, does not translate into egalitarianism. Though in his earlier works of art criticism he

⁵ James Clark Sherburne identifies the "most important" among Ruskin's principles of social criticism to be "his pioneering perception of the possibility of an abundance of good things for all men and his rejection of the usual Victorian belief that life is a struggle in which scarcity is the expected condition" (Sherburne, *John Ruskin or the Ambiguities of Abundance: A Study in Social and Economic Criticism* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972], p. 69). I agree with Sherburne's argument, but I wish to draw attention to Ruskin's anxiety about consuming in the present, before that "possibility of abundance" is realized.

⁶ The political economists whom Ruskin singles out for attack—such as Adam Smith and, more extensively, John Stuart Mill—were in fact sensitive and accomplished moral thinkers quite cognizant of the limitations of their science. Ruskin's vitriol would have been more accurately pointed at the popularizers of political economy, who took the descriptive theoretical precepts of these incisive thinkers as prescriptive dogma. See John Tyree Fain, *Ruskin and the Economists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1956), p. 47; Alan Lee, "Ruskin and Political Economy: *Unto this last*," in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 71–73; and Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, p. 62. Willie Henderson assesses Ruskin's reading of Mill and argues that what many perceive to be "unfairness" on Ruskin's part can be attributed to stylistic differences between the two writers (see Henderson, *John Ruskin's Political Economy* [London and New York: Routledge, 2000], pp. 107–24).

⁷ Karl Polanyi sees industrial capitalism and its delusive belief in the supremacy of the economy and the market as anomalous in history; he argues that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships," and describes the community-oriented practices of "reciprocity and redistribution" that generally govern human societies (see Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1944, 2001], pp. 49–58). Ruskin advocates such practices within the framework of a paternalistic government.

embraces the ideal of an aesthetic democracy, he generally advocates a paternalistic government that recognizes different and mutually dependent roles for different persons.⁸ Nevertheless, Ruskin's influence on thinkers and movements working variously for equality has been vast, and he is a foundational thinker in what John Maynard Keynes called the "underworld" of economic thought, or the tradition working in opposition to the capitalist mainstream.⁹

Ruskin was not the first British thinker to see an opportunity for political action and expression in consumption.¹⁰ But today he is hailed as "the founder of moral consumption" and recognized as an important early thinker in the ongoing effort to define and achieve ethical behavior in the context of consumer culture.¹¹ His insistence that buyers consider the

⁸ Linda Dowling traces this move from aesthetic-democratic to paternalist in her investigation of the "Whig aesthetic paradox," a study that bears upon much discussed here; she attributes Ruskin's shift in part to his loss of faith in 1857 (see Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996], pp. 25–49). P. D. Anthony situates Ruskin in relation to William Morris and to Marxist thought (see Anthony, *John Ruskin's Labour: A Study of Ruskin's Social Theory* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983]). Williams gives a brief analysis of his paternalism (see *Culture and Society*, pp. 130–48).

⁹ See Anthony, *John Ruskin's Labour*, p. 189. Gill G. Cockram offers the fullest account of Ruskin's influence; Ruskin's work has been important to (among others) William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, the Christian Socialists, and the founders of the British Labour Party (see Cockram, *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* [London and New York: Tauris, 2007]). Here it is worth noting in particular that Ruskin's writings were carefully read by Mahatma Gandhi, whose Swadeshi movement made consumption a mode of political expression and action (see Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003], pp. 40–42).

¹⁰ Participants in Britain's consumer cooperative movement, which began as early the late eighteenth century and flourished intermittently during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also saw—albeit with varied degrees of radicalism—consumption as a potential mode of resistance to capitalism. See Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1996); and Gurney, "Labor's Great Arch: Cooperation and Cultural Revolution in Britain, 1795–1926," in *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840–1990*, ed. Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 135–74; the editors' introduction to this collection also offers useful historical background.

¹¹ See Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, p. 128. David M. Craig's book-length study argues for Ruskin's current relevance as a thinker in consumer ethics (see Craig, *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* [Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2006]).

lives of those who produce the goods they buy, as well as the environmental effects of those purchases, makes him an eloquent forerunner of the “political consumerism” movement today.¹² Like Ruskin, today’s political consumers see the market as an arena in which one’s choices affect other humans and in which one is therefore, in effect, interacting with other humans, albeit at a distance.

Eliot too conceives of economic behavior as social behavior. Reading *Middlemarch* alongside works by Ruskin that are central texts in the history of political consumerism shows that Eliot’s novel too has a place in that history. When we place *Middlemarch* in the context of writing about ethical consumption, we can trace the contours of an important subcategory within the larger rubric of the “novel of purpose” defined by Amanda Claybaugh: the novel of consumer ethics. Claybaugh discusses *Middlemarch* as one of many novels of purpose in which reform is treated but not necessarily endorsed; her insight is that authors might write novels of purpose for reasons wholly apart from a wish to provoke reform, and that we misread when we take their works to be merely hypocritical. In the novel of consumer ethics, such a reluctance to endorse reform is accompanied by a readiness to represent consumption as a form of social and political participation. In her reading of *Middlemarch*, Claybaugh argues that Eliot is an author who “chafed against” the role of the novelist of purpose and who “sought to rid the realist novel of its too-reformist purposes.”¹³ We can

¹² Micheletti contends that political consumerism is “*individualized collective action*,” political engagement suitable for a world in which multinational corporations may be more powerful than political institutions, and in which identity tends to be serial and individual rather than fixed and collective (see Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, p. xi). See also Andreas Follesdal, “Political Consumerism as Chance and Challenge,” in *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, ed. Michele Micheletti, Andreas Follesdal, and Dietlind Stolle (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2004), pp. 3–20. Critics of political consumerism often object to the movement’s implicit acceptance of the economic concept of “consumer sovereignty,” adopting the Marxist argument that consumption can only serve to enmesh persons more securely within the system of consumer capitalism. For a thorough interrogation of the notion of “consumer sovereignty,” see Peter G. Penz, *Consumer Sovereignty and Human Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).

¹³ Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 50, 117. Claybaugh discusses

build upon this observation by noting that while Eliot's novel avoids endorsing traditional forms of political reform, it also encourages us to understand consumption as an act with political and social consequences. What appears to be simply a rejection of political change is also therefore a representation of a very modern mode of political engagement, one that would become increasingly relevant as the development of consumer society accelerated over the course of the following century. It is not new to read Eliot's work alongside Ruskin's, or to note agreement between them. But when we use Ruskin's economic writings to expose *Middlemarch* as a novel of consumer ethics, we can name as one of the novel's modernities its representation of personal economic consumption as an emergent mode of social and political agency.

Eliot's and Ruskin's shared sense that economic exchange is a social phenomenon anticipates Georg Simmel's later effort to investigate "the sociological character of money" and his understanding of exchange as "one of those relations through which a number of individuals become a social group." Taking exchange as the basic form of all human interaction, Simmel defines a society as the "synthesis" of many such interactions, a "living organism" that is "the sum of interacting forces among the atoms of the organism."¹⁴ Writing decades before Simmel offers this description of money's social functions and effects, Eliot and Ruskin use the same organic model in communicating to their readers the interconnectedness and interdependence of all persons in the whole that is society. To spend money mindfully on a purchase, they insist, is to experience one's unavoidable participation in the economic systems of circulation that manifest this interconnectedness. Eliot and Ruskin struggle to

Middlemarch and Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) in the same chapter, arguing that both Eliot and James "recognized in reformist fiction a starker version of the formal problem posed by all forms of realism—and at the center of their own careers. This is the problem of representativeness" (*The Novel of Purpose*, p. 117). It should be noted that *The Princess Casamassima* is also a novel of consumer ethics, and is concerned perhaps even more conspicuously than *Middlemarch* with the problem of how to spend wealth well.

¹⁴ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 174–75.

define a consumer ethics for a modern industrial world where interrelation appears to be infinite and where, for that reason, consumption must be considered in light of its effects on others. Their work is worth examining as we attempt to define consumer ethics for our own postmodern, post-industrial world. Zygmunt Bauman writes: "Within the world's dense network of global interdependence, we cannot be sure of our moral innocence whenever other human beings suffer indignity, misery, or pain. We cannot declare that we do not know, nor can we be certain that there is nothing we could change in our conduct that would avert or at least alleviate the sufferers' fate"; Bauman's assessment of the difficulties of acting ethically within "liquid modernity" echoes Eliot's awareness that the effects of our smallest actions are "incalculably diffusive" (*Middlemarch*, p. 825).¹⁵ The call for moral vigilance that Eliot and Ruskin issue speaks to our anxious era as well as their own.



In *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), Ruskin distinguishes between "selfish" and "unselfish" spending: an article "may be one useful to the whole community, or useful only to ourselves"; we spend "unselfishly," he asserts, when our purchases direct the labor of producers "to the service of the community."¹⁶ Ruskin orders consumers to view themselves as

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), p. 72. Bauman has written extensively on "liquid modernity" as a mode in which social and institutional systems are fluid and transient, and human experience is characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty.

¹⁶ John Ruskin, "A Joy for Ever," Being the Substance (with Additions) of Two Lectures on *The Political Economy of Art* (1857, 1880), ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 16 of *The Works of John Ruskin* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1903-1912), p. 49. Subsequent citations in the text refer to this edition as *The Political Economy of Art*. In this essay I treat Ruskin's two major early pieces of economic writing. Ruskin wrote *The Political Economy of Art*, his first sustained foray into social and economic criticism, as a series of lectures; he delivered them in Manchester in 1857 and published them in the same year. Much of his later economic thinking appears in some form in this work; on the occasion of its (very successful) reissuing in 1880, Ruskin wrote in his preface, "what I have since written on the political influence of the Arts has been little more than the expansion of these first lectures" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 12). While it is probable that George Eliot read *Unto This Last* (1860), it is certain that she read this

duty-bearing members of a community rather than individuals seeking gratification: they should place the needs of others before their own desires, and spend accordingly. This emphasis on taking care of others before oneself—and the particular obligation of the rich to do so—finds an echo in the attitude toward wealth of Eliot's heroine: one of Dorothea's most frequently articulated problems is her unease with her money and her worry about how to spend it.¹⁷ Dorothea is the principal voice for Ruskinian economic thinking in *Middlemarch*, and her views are Ruskinian not just in substance but also in style: she is passionate, indignant, and given to overstatement and occasional contradiction. At the beginning of the novel she is deeply engaged in her "Puritan" religion and has a rather indiscriminate enthusiasm for renunciation; as her less pious sister says: "She likes giving up" (*Middlemarch*, p. 18). She answers the problem of how to spend her wealth by recourse to an anxious and almost compulsive habit of real or intended philanthropy.

When faced with the question of how to consume ethically, Ruskin, Eliot, and Dorothea—each a sometime Evangelical—are consistently attracted to the simple answer of asceticism.¹⁸ Their anxiety about consumption is not unusual in nineteenth-century Britain. Discussing "the dilemmas of affluent Puritanism," Deborah Cohen describes a movement over the course of the century away from widespread renunciatory religiosity toward a "post-evangelical mindset" in which purchases and possessions

earlier work, as she expressed qualified admiration for it in an 1858 letter (see George Eliot, letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 17 January 1858, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954–1978], II, 422).

¹⁷ Money in Eliot's fiction has been a fruitful focus for critical inquiry. Eliot's relation to economic thought has recently been explored in two works of criticism that read her novels alongside economic texts. See Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); and Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*. Gillian Beer's earlier article explores the functions of money in *Middlemarch* (see Beer, "Circulatory Systems: Money and Gossip in *Middlemarch*," *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, no. 26 [1987], 47–62).

¹⁸ Elisabeth Jay notes that George Eliot and Ruskin share a "desire to defend realism on moral rather than aesthetic grounds," and she identifies this desire as typical among lapsed Evangelicals in the Victorian era. Jay suggests that the novelist's affinity for the critic "stems . . . from the one common inheritance they shared, Evangelicalism" (Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], pp. 217, 210).

themselves served moral functions.¹⁹ Both the plot and the composition of *Middlemarch* take place as this shift is happening. “At the dawn of the age of mass consumerism,” Cohen explains, “worldly pleasures had first to be cleared of the charge of self-indulgence” (*Household Gods*, p. 30). Eliot and Ruskin address the question of whether that charge should in fact be cleared, and they ask us to consider the losses attendant upon both self-indulgence and self-denial. Both authors recognize that the question of consumption must be more complicated than the young Dorothea acknowledges. To say that renunciation is always right is to give a too-easy answer; as Ruskin asserts in *The Political Economy of Art*, perfection lies in a “balanced division” of care that sees to both “utility and splendour” (p. 20).

When the category of art serves to legitimize select modes and habits of consumption, the education that provides access to art becomes the criterion for consuming without the stain of luxuriousness. Education, and women’s exclusion from it, is of course one of the great obsessions of *Middlemarch*. The variously undereducated women of the novel suffer from, among other things, disorders of consumption: Dorothea’s anxious renunciations and impulsive philanthropy are only somewhat healthier than Rosamond’s excessive zeal for buying expensive goods on credit. Aesthetics and political economy—discourses of a common origin—are linked in *Middlemarch* not just implicitly, because the novel represents the role of art in marking out social and economic boundaries, but also explicitly, because these are both subjects from which the novel’s female characters are shut out by their laughable half-educations.

Critics have studied both Dorothea’s aesthetic education in appreciating art and her political-economic education in spending.²⁰ The ongoing critical discussion about consumption

¹⁹ See Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), pp. xvi, 19. Cohen points to “Mrs. Bulstrode’s naïve way of conciliating piety and worldliness, the nothingness of this life and the desirability of cut glass, the consciousness at once of filthy rags and the best damask” (*Middlemarch*, p. 263) as an archly offered expression of the era’s pressing question: “How to be good *and* well-to-do” (*Household Gods*, p. 30).

²⁰ Joseph Wiesenfarth argues that Dorothea’s education over the course of the novel is an aesthetic one: he shows that she learns a Ruskinian “language of art” in order to

in the novel, however, does not sufficiently interpenetrate with the discussion about art and aesthetics. Critical studies of consumption and commodity culture in *Middlemarch* err when they examine spending on domestic objects and on female dress and ornament and devote less attention to the novel's treatment of objects categorized as art.²¹ The novel itself resists this division of subject matter: George Eliot generally represents art and other aesthetically interesting items in the novel as things that money can buy. And because the aesthetic has been since the eighteenth century (at least) a crucial category within the cultural conversation about consumption, Dorothea's aesthetic education and her political-economic education in consuming should not be studied as discrete phenomena; the two educations need to be examined as one.

Dorothea suffers from her lack of education in aesthetics and political economy perhaps most obviously when her uncle Mr. Brooke uses her ignorance in those fields to dismiss her opinions. Having apparently dabbled during his youth at the eighteenth-century moral philosophy in which these divergent discourses originate, he uses his gentleman's education to deflect his niece from the topics of beauty, money, and societal

resolve the conflict between her ascetic Puritan morality and her desire to enjoy beauty (see Wiesenfarth, "Middlemarch: The Language of Art," *PMLA*, 97 [1982], 363–77). More recently, Elaine Freedgood has characterized Dorothea's education as "the bildung . . . of the modern consumer" (Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006], p. 119). Krista Lysack also examines Dorothea as a consumer. In her book about Victorian women and shopping, she contends (as I do) that consumption can present an occasion for agency; she finds that Dorothea's "management style is extravagantly, even perversely restrained," and is "the opposite of the middle-class mode of management constructed in Victorian domestic advice literature." Her argument emphasizes the heroine's tendency toward "risky investment" and her "willing[ness] to borrow against the future," as she tries to make "an 'epic life'" (Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2008], p. 83.)

²¹ Art objects figure importantly, however, in Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things*, as well as in Andrew H. Miller's illuminating chapter on commodity culture in *Middlemarch* (see Miller, *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995], pp. 189–218). See also Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979); and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008). Witemeyer and Yeazell discuss Eliot's thinking about art and Ruskin's significant influence on it.

organization by noting that she can never be a qualified judge (like himself) on such subjects. Early in the novel, we read of Dorothea's "annoyance at being twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights" (*Middlemarch*, p. 18). The offending twit issues from Brooke, who says: "Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know. . . . I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. *There* is a book, now. I took in all the new ideas at one time—human perfectibility, now" (p. 17). Possessed of a classical education and a mighty penchant for allusion, Brooke affectionately revisits ill-grasped ideas, deploying approximations of them good-heartedly for their cultural capital. His regular interjections of "you know" are friendly, but they also impose a certain acquiescence upon his auditors. Thus does the avuncular, oblivious man maintain his particular dominance. It is a dominance based on class, but also—and usually explicitly—on gender. Brooke's disjointed commentary furnishes some of the novel's funniest moments, but its effects on Dorothea are unfortunately cruel.

Political economy and art are linked in the novel because they are both areas from which Dorothea is shut out by her inadequate education, and they are both subjects that her uncle uses to remind her in his allusive and approximating fashion of her intellectual irrelevance. When Dorothea explains to her uncle with her usual fiery loquacity why it has been difficult for her to like art, his "masculine consciousness" falls into "rather a stammering condition under the eloquence of his niece"; he eventually, with difficulty, says to her and Will Ladislaw:

"There is something in what you say, my dear, something in what you say—but not everything—eh, Ladislaw? You and I don't like our pictures and statues being found fault with. Young ladies are a little ardent, you know—a little one-sided, my dear. Fine art, poetry, that kind of thing, elevates a nation—*emollit mores*—you understand a little Latin now." (*Middlemarch*, p. 380)

With the interjection of disembodied Latin, the explicit statement about the mental incapacity of women, the lazy half-complete references, and the clubby, even slightly bullying, appeal for solidarity with the fellow male present, Brooke is in fine

characteristic form. When the masculine consciousness finds itself threatened, art, like political economy, serves to extinguish young female lights. Here Eliot quite overtly represents the use of the aesthetic by the more powerful to exert dominance over the less powerful.²²

We find another instance of young female lights snuffed out by reference to art in the scene in which Dorothea first meets Ladislaw. When asked to comment on his sketch, Dorothea offers a long, self-deprecating comment in which she states of pictures, "They are a language I do not understand" (*Middlemarch*, p. 78). Joseph Wiesenfarth uses this remark to ground an argument about Dorothea's education in Ruskinian aesthetics. Drawing links to Ladislaw's later remark about art as an "old language" and Eliot's review of Ruskin's lectures, Wiesenfarth reads the "language" that Dorothea mentions (*Middlemarch*, p. 200) as the Ruskinian "language of art" (Wiesenfarth, "Middlemarch: The Language of Art," p. 366). "Language" is indeed an important word to trace as one studies Dorothea's progress into greater knowledge in *Middlemarch*. But the language she lacks is not simply the language of art. She says of pictures, "They are a language I do not understand," but she uses the same word when expressing uncertainty about the right means of "doing good": "everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know" (*Middlemarch*, p. 28). For Dorothea the language requisite for "doing good" is the language that enables one to talk about how money, persons, and property move in the world. As Dorice Williams Elliott states

²² Here the use of art and aesthetics for ultimately social purposes is a specifically male practice, but the novel does not imply that this is always the case. Rosamond makes the appreciation of art a fatally effective tactic for presenting herself as a perfect young lady and thus snaring Lydgate. See in particular the episode of *The Keepsake*. George Eliot stages a confrontation between two rival suitors in which both they and the coveted girl attempt to get what they want by drawing from varied stores of cultural capital (see *Middlemarch*, pp. 263–66). Marjorie Garson discusses this scene in her investigation of "the ideological work done by the equation of good taste and moral refinement" in *Middlemarch* (Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2007], p. 4). Garson observes accurately that the novel is aware of the systems that Bourdieu observes, but is unable to escape them: Eliot fails to achieve "sociological objectivity," Garson argues, because of "the mystified representation of Dorothea's taste and beauty" (*Moral Taste*, p. 38; see also pp. 330–67).

succinctly in her reading of this passage, “the ‘language’ Dorothea does not know is political economy.”²³ Brooke’s uniform “twitting” about art and political economy helps to establish the continuity of her ignorance.

This ignorance makes Dorothea’s wealth a painful responsibility rather than an opportunity for profit or pleasure: her money buys her, as we have seen, “nothing but an uneasy conscience” (*Middlemarch*, p. 364). This uneasiness recalls Ruskin’s remark in *The Political Economy of Art* that “wealth is simply one of the greatest powers which can be entrusted to human hands: a power, not indeed to be envied, because it seldom makes us happy; but still less to be abdicated or despised” (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 17). He adds that “inherited wealth” involves “the most definite responsibilities” (p. 128).

Middlemarch makes true what in other stories might be merely felt: within the novel, money earned through work—even through trade or manufacturing—seems free from stain, while wealth gained by birth or marriage repeatedly bears a moral taint. Casaubon’s inherited fortune (and Dorothea’s fortune by marriage) should rightfully have gone to his aunt Julia, and thence to Will Ladislav’s father. Ladislav’s mother’s family’s money, held by Bulstrode, is gained through crime, and thus too dirty an inheritance for Ladislav’s conscience. *Middlemarch*’s plotting literalizes fears born of anxiety about wealth generally, and unearned wealth in particular. Dorothea’s fortune by marriage does not merely *feel* unfairly held: it *is* the rightful property of an impoverished person. George Eliot’s plot thus gives Dorothea’s generalized, amorphous feelings of guilt about money—which precede her marriage—a legitimate and specific object in the real world. Dorothea urges Casaubon to give money to Will, contending: “if one has too much in consequence of others being wronged, it seems to me that the divine voice which tells us to set that wrong right must be obeyed” (*Middlemarch*, p. 365). But there is slippage between the “too much” that she has because of her marriage and the “too much” to which she was born. Immediately prior to stating

²³ Elliott, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2002), p. 206.

Will's claim, she says to her husband: "I have been thinking about money all day—that I have always had too much, and especially the prospect of too much" (p. 365). Earlier she says to Will, "I have always had too much of everything" (p. 357). The occasion for "giving up" is new, but the uncomfortable sense of unjust superabundance has "always" been there. The same plot that creates a real object for Dorothea's longstanding anxieties also makes the romantic hero the rightful heir to not one but two stolen fortunes, denied to him on both his maternal and his paternal sides by the rebellious and righteous behavior of his renouncing antecedents. His pennilessness is so overdetermined as to accomplish the effects of caricature: the sheer volume of foregone wealth he does *not* have is enough to make the not-having of money one of his salient features.

Like Ruskin, Dorothea sees consumption as an activity through which one may inadvertently injure other human beings. Near the novel's conclusion, she sits down to read "her particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one's neighbours, or—what comes to the same thing—so as to do them the most good" (*Middlemarch*, p. 794). Dorothea's aim in political economy is Ruskinian: not to gratify herself, or to build wealth generally, but to do good. Her wish to spend so as not to injure others is notably defensive rather than constructive. We see this defensive stance in an even more extreme form when she says to Will, "I try not to have desires merely for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already" (pp. 382–83). In Dorothea's imagination, even desires not yet acted upon may bear potentially harmful effects on people around her.²⁴

This cautious hyperconsciousness helps Dorothea to live by George Eliot's moral principles. Both for Eliot and for Dorothea, moral living requires that one maintain vigilant awareness, because there are always unintended consequences to one's actions: when one's effects in the world are "incalculably

²⁴ This sense that one's internal desires may have harmful effects in the external world correlates with George Eliot's interest in convenient manslaughter and accidental or ambiguous criminality—as, for example, in the deaths of Raffles in *Middlemarch* and Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

diffusive,” some of those effects will be troubling (*Middlemarch*, p. 825). The circulation of money and goods in a society (be it global or local) offers a material manifestation of this truth: the image of the web that George Eliot famously uses to figure human society finds its real-world corollary in an economy. Ruskin’s *The Political Economy of Art* clarifies that consumption is a moral minefield in this respect: the chains of supply and demand set us at a distance from other humans, and, if we are to live rightly, we must struggle continually to discern the effects of our choices upon those individuals.

Ruskin collapses the distance between the shopper and the worker by personalizing relations rhetorically, describing the relation between consumer and producer as one between master and servant.²⁵ Dorothea already has personal relations with those to whom she is mistress, and her mastery over them is real rather than metaphoric. Ruskin writes that “the rich man” should administer his larger share of capital “for the profit of all, directing each man to the labour which is most healthy for him, and most serviceable for the community” (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 129). Ruskin’s rich man exercises a sort of political leadership through his consumption, and personal gratification does not seem to interest him. The political character of his power, and the fact that his money puts him in the role of “master” to those beneath him, make Ruskin’s good rich man resemble a feudal lord.

Dorothea, as the heir by blood to her uncle’s estate, conforms partly to this archaic ideal. She is of course a rich woman instead of a rich man: Elliott notes that her various charitable activities “are characteristic of the traditional Lady Bountiful” (*The Angel out of the House*, p. 205). Jessica Gerard argues that nineteenth-century British women of the gentry and aristocracy served an important political function as they performed these activities: they “reinforced the landed classes’ rule over the rural poor, implementing paternalism and enforcing

²⁵ Ruskin admonishes his auditors to imagine the workers who produce the goods they buy, and to sympathize with these workers as individual humans; the effort he insists upon is exactly analogous to the efforts of today’s “political consumers” “to trace the commodity chain of the products offered to us on the global consumer market,” as Micheletti puts it (*Political Virtue and Shopping*, p. 74).

deference."²⁶ This link between philanthropy and the preservation of the status quo emerges clearly in Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860). Mounting an argument against socialism, he writes that the "division of property is its destruction," and explains: "The rich man does not keep back meat from the poor by retaining his riches; but by basely using them. Riches are a form of strength; and a strong man does not injure others by keeping his strength, but by using it injuriously."²⁷ Ruskin argues in *The Political Economy of Art* that "a rich man ought to be continually examining how he may spend his money for the advantage of others" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 128).

Dorothea's efforts at the sort of philanthropy that Ruskin advises are continually frustrated, however. Even as she comes of age, and even as she devotes diligent attention to her little heap of books on political economy, her philanthropic dreams are difficult to realize.²⁸ Her partial understanding and failed attempts to participate in political economy can be traced at least in part to her weak education. We should recognize that Dorothea's earnest work with her books is the effort of a tenacious autodidact, and that when she tries "to get light as to the best way of spending money," she is attempting to rekindle the "lights" extinguished so painfully by her uncle hundreds of pages before (*Middlemarch*, pp. 794, 18). Just as Rosamond's habits of consumption are shaped by her education at Mrs. Lemon's, so are Dorothea's shaped by her education at

²⁶ Gerard, "Lady Bountiful: Women of the Landed Classes and Rural Philanthropy," *Victorian Studies*, 30 (1987), 183.

²⁷ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 17 of *The Works of John Ruskin* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–1912), pp. 106–7n. Subsequent citations in the text refer to this edition.

²⁸ Dorothea complains: "they tell me I have too little [money] for any great scheme of the sort I like best, and yet I have too much. I don't know what to do" (*Middlemarch*, p. 754). Dorothea's remark about what "they" tell her suggests that one reason for her philanthropic frustrations is that, as a woman, she does not have sufficient control over her wealth. For the limitations faced by women philanthropists, see Gerard, "Lady Bountiful," p. 191; and Elliott, *The Angel out of the House*, p. 195. In her reading of *Middlemarch* as a chronicle of "the failure of the ideal represented by the philanthropic heroine" (*The Angel out of the House*, p. 190), Elliott notes that Dorothea's "great scheme" of founding a village recalls Owenite projects, and that nineteenth-century readers would have been aware that most such efforts ended in failure (see *The Angel out of the House*, pp. 194, 189).

Lausanne under Mademoiselle Poinçon. That education has, all too inadequately, made “Puritan” religion the best guide for Dorothea to interpret the world as she meets it. At the beginning of the book, both her aesthetics and her political economy are Puritan in character.

On the topic of improving cottages, Dorothea contends against her uncle: “It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all” (*Middlemarch*, p. 16). She uses moral and religious diction here to defend her idea about spending money.²⁹ In a later discussion about cottage improvement initiatives, Sir James makes the financial remark, “Of course, it is sinking money; that is why people object to it” (*Middlemarch*, p. 30). Once again, Dorothea responds to a money problem in religious terms, pronouncing: “I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us” (p. 31). The young Dorothea’s political economy, like her general approach to life, it is characterized by an immediate recourse to renunciation; this blind grasping is part of her desperate allegiance to the sole source of seriousness to which her intelligence has been allowed access.

The narrator is explicit with regard to Dorothea’s similarly untutored Puritan perception of art: “To poor Dorothea these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring into the midst of her Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life” (*Middlemarch*, p. 72). Dorothea herself is sufficiently self-aware to explain some of this thinking to Brooke:

“That is one reason why I did not like the pictures here, dear uncle—which you think me stupid about. I used to come from the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness like a pain within

²⁹ This move is Ruskinian: Claudia C. Klaver notes that Ruskin’s formal strategy involves reinserting the moral and the religious into the economic (see Klaver, *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England* [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2003], pp. 161–72). Supriya Rajan discusses Ruskin’s “synthesis of economic and religious categories such as exchange and ritual,” with reference to Baudrillard’s work on sacrifice (Rajan, “Sacred Commerce: Rites of Reciprocity in Ruskin,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 35, no. 1 [2008], 183).

me, and the simpering pictures in the drawing-room seemed to me like a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false, while we don't mind how hard the truth is for the neighbours outside our walls." (pp. 379–80)

Just as in political economy she clung to the Puritan strategy of renunciation, in art Dorothea clings to the Puritan idea that art is deception, separate from and irrelevant to life.

Less explicit than Dorothea's dual ignorance in aesthetics and political economy, and her reliance on an inadequate Puritan worldview to understand them, is the inseparability of the two subjects for her within that worldview. She does not particularly like art, because she views it not in aesthetic terms as an object that might provide pleasure, but in political-economic terms as a commodity upon which wealth and mental energy may be spent. As such, it is a costly thing that takes these resources away from other objects of expenditure, like the amelioration of living conditions for the poor. It looms before her as "all this immense expense of art, that seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world"; she cannot enjoy this expensive thing, she says: "It spoils my enjoyment of anything when I am made to think that most people are shut out from it" (*Middlemarch*, p. 214). And just as she views art in political-economic terms, she tends to cast her perceptions of political-economic phenomena in aesthetic terms. The troubling sights in the village constitute for her a "coarse ugliness"; she wishes to attempt, by building cottages, "to make the life of poverty beautiful!" (p. 31); and she tells Ladislaw as she describes her concerns about the great unjustified cost of art, "I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody's life" (p. 214).



The unity of political-economic and aesthetic concerns in Dorothea's mind corresponds with Ruskin's views on art and society. Ruskin, like Dorothea, found himself accused of being too passionate and too ill-informed when he expressed these views. His emphatically oppositional stance

toward the political-economic establishment of his day involved a subversive embrace of this apparent naïveté and a remarkable refusal to accept the basic principles of the science.³⁰ In *Unto This Last* Ruskin specifically targets John Stuart Mill's fundamental assertion that value, in political-economic terms, is always value in exchange; for Ruskin this is an unacceptable way of understanding the world, even temporarily for the purpose of intellectual inquiry.³¹

Ruskin subscribes instead to a labor theory of value that assesses the value of an object primarily in terms of the quantity and quality of human labor that went into its production. This theory makes value intrinsic—and also implies that calculations of value must take into account moral questions about the conditions of production. This understanding of value shapes Ruskin's consumer ethics. His belief that each article must be evaluated for its integral worth correlates with a sense that money dies at the point of purchase, and with a zero-sum conception of wealth as limited. The political economists, in contrast, see wealth as expandable and money as a continuously circulating force for growth, a symbolic substance reabsorbed back into the economy in order to fuel new activity and build new value. Ruskin's objection to fluid and extrinsic value makes him particularly averse to credit; in *Unto This Last* he places in the same category as old-fashioned poisoning and blackmail “the more modern and less honourable system of obtaining goods on credit, and the other variously improved methods of appropriation” (*Unto This Last*, pp. 61–62). Credit is of course essential to the rapidly expanding consumer economy of his

³⁰ One example is Ruskin's notorious claim in the 1857 preface to *The Political Economy of Art*: “I have never read any author on political economy, except Adam Smith, twenty years ago” (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 10).

³¹ Though the instability of value was not a new idea in nineteenth-century Britain, the first half of the century saw important changes in the way in which economic institutions worked, and those changes had to do with embracing an understanding of value as unfixed and, more important, expandable. See Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 140–41. Especially during financial crises, the question of how to conceive of value was an urgent, practical, and public issue. Poovey investigates the ways that various genres “mediated the credit economy” and “helped make the system of credit and debt usable and the market model of value familiar as well” (*Genres of the Credit Economy*, p. 2).

era; in *Middlemarch* the representatives of this economy are Rosamond and Lydgate, spenders on credit and buyers of many, many things.

Ruskin understands that the modern consumer economy to which he is opposed depends upon continual purchasing: in *The Political Economy of Art* he mounts his opposition to this sort of economy partly by valorizing goods that are “permanent” rather than “perishable.” He urges consumers to understand that goods fall into one of two categories: an “article may be a useful and lasting one, or it may be a useless and perishable one” (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 49).³² It is the conscientious consumer’s duty to choose to buy goods in the former category rather than those in the latter. Ruskin imagines “some political economist” interrupting his lecture to say, “Better allow for a little wholesome evanescence—beneficent destruction: let each age provide art for itself, or we shall soon have so many good pictures that we shall not know what to do with them” (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 40). The political economist argues that producing and buying permanent art will result in oversupply and a consequent drop in demand that “will throw your artists quite out of work” (p. 40). The economic model advocated by the political economist imagines goods continually being produced, bought, used, exhausted, and replaced. To this dynamic model Ruskin opposes one that is luminously static.

³² Ruskin’s attack on perishable goods neatly pinpoints the insatiable desire for novelty that is the signature feature of consumer society. Perishability defines fashion, and the subject of fashion is a crucial entry point for Georg Simmel’s and Walter Benjamin’s analyses of consumer society; see especially Simmel, *The Philosophy of Fashion* (1905), trans. Mark Ritter and David Frisby, in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), pp. 187–205; and Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 62–81. The representation of female dress in *Middlemarch* has received much critical attention: Miller argues that “women’s dress is the paradigmatic instance of material culture in *Middlemarch*” (*Novels behind Glass*, pp. 12–13; see also pp. 192–97). Lysack’s *Come Buy, Come Buy* and Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things* also discuss the functions of dress and fashion in the novel. Kate Flint’s examination of materiality and its perception in *Middlemarch* situates a discussion of female dress in the larger context of the textile manufacturing industry also (albeit less conspicuously) represented in the novel (see Flint, “The Materiality of *Middlemarch*,” in “*Middlemarch*” in the *Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Chase [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006], pp. 67–70).

Ruskin associates consumption and evanescence not with the fecundity of economic regeneration but with death.³³ His alternative economic model puts a stop to the ceaseless destructive flow of commerce. A quiet continuum between past and present characterizes his scheme, which is also suffused with the vitalism that will become more explicit in *Unto This Last*. In that work Ruskin states the principle that wealth is life; here, in *The Political Economy of Art*, he expresses the idea that an ideal economy is one saturated with a certain still deathlessness, an atemporal constancy of life that values conservation over growth. "Wherever you go, whatever you do," he advises, "act more for *preservation* and less for *production*" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 80). Following this advice is part of "fulfilling" our "duties to the Past and the Future," which are "reciprocal duties . . . constantly to be exchanged between the living and the dead"; the living have an obligation to do things that will be "serviceable" to "those who are to come after us," just as those persons will have an obligation "to accept this work of ours with thanks and remembrance, not thrusting it aside or tearing it down the moment they think they have no use for it" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 63). Ruskin's atemporal society makes generations relate to each other as contemporaries. Human creativity, he argues, should proceed not in cycles of production and destruction, but in a single linear movement: "the science of nations is to be accumulative from father to son" (pp. 63–64). Poetry, history, science, and art should develop thus, "the work of living men is not superseding, but building itself upon the work of the past" (p. 64). This structure of reciprocal obligation involves hope for the future and diligence in caring for the work of the past: all "Good Government," he writes, "is *expectant* as well as *conservative* . . . if it ceases to be hopeful of better things, it ceases to be a wise guardian of present things" (p. 54).

³³ In *Unto This Last*, Ruskin will express a positive conception of "consumption absolute" according to which, "as consumption is the end and aim of production, so life is the end and aim of consumption" (*Unto This Last*, pp. 98, 104). This correlates, of course, with his view, declared in that work, that "THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE" (*Unto This Last*, p. 105). *The Political Economy of Art*, however, offers negative images of consumption as wasteful and destructive.

Art has a crucial role to play in the economy of Ruskin's society. It is the signature imperishable good, the commodity that self-regenerates instead of being exhausted by use. In this quality it anticipates Ruskin's definition in *Unto This Last* of "moral power" that is an "invisible gold," which "does not necessarily diminish in spending" (*Unto This Last*, pp. 54-55). He considers works of art "treasures" because they are a "permanent means of pleasure and instruction" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 117n). He goes further still, and suggests that their permanence is such that it somehow bleeds into the world around them, describing "a certain protective effect on wealth exercised by works of high art":

Generally speaking, persons who decorate their houses with pictures will not spend so much money in papers, carpets, curtains, or other expensive and perishable luxuries as they would otherwise. Works of good art, like books, exercise a conservative effect on the rooms they are kept in; and the wall of the library or picture gallery remains undisturbed, when those of other rooms are re-papered or re-panelled. . . . And, generally speaking, the occupation of a large number of hands in painting or sculpture in any nation may be considered as tending to check the disposition to indulge in perishable luxury. (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 117n)

Art has a "protective" or "conservative" effect partly because it consolidates wealth in the purchasing and preservation of its permanence, rather than in "perishable luxury." But where does art stop and luxury begin? Ruskin suggests an explanation when he asserts, "things that give intellectual or emotional enjoyment may be accumulated, and do not perish in using; but continually supply new pleasures and new powers of giving pleasures to others" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 133). The intellectual or emotional enjoyment available indefinitely in a work of art, then, is the feature that distinguishes it from luxury and puts it outside time.

But Ruskin acknowledges that "it is, of course, impossible to fix an accurate limit" between these two categories, or between that kind of property that is mere luxury and that kind of property that "bestows intellectual or emotional pleasure, consisting of land set apart for purposes of delight more than for agriculture,

of books, works of art, and objects of natural history" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 133). In fact, any given object in this latter category may slip into the former category, depending on the function it serves: "the most noble works of art are continually made material of vulgar luxury or of criminal pride." To qualify as art rather than luxury, the object must be "rightly used": "intellectual or emotional pleasure" must be felt (p. 133).

The defining feature of art, then, is the manner in which it is "used." An art object may be prized for its monetary or exchange value ("vulgar luxury"), but an art object is unique among buyable commodities in that, if "rightly used," it may be used again and again, indefinitely: it is an inexhaustible, even self-regenerating, commodity. Ruskin constructs "art" as that which lasts, that which is imperishable, and the rest of commodity matter, including luxuries, as that which perishes in the using. This right sort of use may not be easily achieved, however, for as Ruskin has told us earlier, a "good picture, or book, or work of art of any kind, is always in some degree fenced and closed about with difficulty" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 58). His diction makes art a high-walled park with a closed gate, and thus emphasizes the exclusionary force of the system he has just constructed. In *Distinction* Bourdieu writes: "of all the objects offered for consumers' choice, there are none more classifying than legitimate works of art, which, while distinctive in general, enable the production of distinctions ad infinitum" (*Distinction*, p. 16). If the capacity to provide "intellectual or emotional enjoyment" is the feature that makes an art object "imperishable" and distinguishes it from a commodity, then those without the cultural capital that facilitates such enjoyment will have a hard time using art "rightly," and will be stuck with mere luxury.

One person who has difficulty using art "rightly" is Dorothea. Having had "a bad style of teaching," she lacks the education that grants access to legitimate aesthetic enjoyment (*Middlemarch*, p. 78). When speaking to Will in Rome, Dorothea makes her great summary statement about her attitude toward art, calling it an "immense expense" and expressing her understanding of it in political-economic rather than aesthetic terms: she sees the art object as a made object like any other, an object that, when bought and maintained, subtracts resources from

more worthy efforts to better the world by helping people. Her arithmetic of scarcity recalls Ruskin's zero-sum economics in *The Political Economy of Art*, as well as his assertion in *Unto This Last* that "for every *plus* there is a precisely equal *minus*" (*Unto This Last*, p. 91).³⁴ And yet, as Wiesenfarth points out in "Middlemarch: The Language of Art," Dorothea has yet to grasp a Ruskinian "language of art": she does not have access to aesthetics as a conceptual tool for regulating consumption.

Will's response to Dorothea's statement makes their exchange a climactic moment in the novel's treatment of the problem of consumption. He says to her: "I call that the fanaticism of sympathy. . . . You might say the same of landscape, of poetry, of all refinement" (*Middlemarch*, p. 214). Will, a well-educated young gentleman, appeals to vocabulary from the discourse of aesthetics ("refinement") in order to make his statement about legitimate pleasure. A sometime artist himself, he insists that we cannot continuously assess all of the objects we encounter for their political-economic value. In contrast to the Ruskinian economy of scarcity that Dorothea envisions, in which her every act of consumption must subtract from the consumption of others, Will opposes an economy of abundance in which enjoyment is not limited. He tells Dorothea:

"The best piety is to enjoy—when you can. You are doing the most then to save the earth's character as an agreeable planet. And enjoyment radiates. It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight—in art or in anything else." (pp. 214–15)

In defending "refinement" against politico-economic evaluation, Will makes the rather shocking assertion that one individual's private delight takes care of the world. This caretaking

³⁴ In speaking of a "Ruskinian economics of scarcity" I do not wish to dispute Sherburne's argument that Ruskin's economic thought is notable for its logic of abundance. I hope to show that while Ruskin's work expresses an expectation of abundance in the near future, it also expresses an important perception of immediate scarcity, and that this perception arises in part from his understanding of spending as (in Sherburne's words) "an end in itself, or a means to consumption" rather than, as the economists would have it, part of "the smooth functioning of the economic machine," or "a means to the circulation of currency and trade" (Sherburne, *John Ruskin or the Ambiguities of Abundance*, p. 145).

occurs via an unexplained mechanism by which “enjoyment radiates.” If Will’s position seems insufficiently explained, or if his statement that in enjoying oneself one is “doing the most . . . to save the earth’s character as an agreeable planet” seems not just intellectually lazy but morally repulsive, then it should be remembered that his words are the outburst of a young man frustrated by the general renunciatory coolness of the woman he adores. Eliot’s narrator notes that Will speaks “impetuously” here (p. 214), and he himself says shortly after these remarks, “I have a hyperbolic tongue” (p. 216). We might also attribute his comments here to his status at this point in the novel as a rather dilettantish artist.

Still, Will Ladislaw’s views may not be too far from George Eliot’s own. Felix Holt, possessed of a more tempered tongue than Will, is a more rational voice for his author, and in “The Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt” (1868) his calm voice offers views that correspond with those expressed in Will’s outburst. Felix Holt describes to his audience of laborers “the treasure of refined needs.”³⁵ This is the “treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling, and manners, great memories and the interpretation of great records” (“Address to Working Men,” p. 425). Though we may infer that this treasure is expensive, it is “distinct from the indulgences of luxury and the pursuit of vain finery.” Felix does not explain where exactly this distinction lies, but he does note in passing that the treasure includes “no smart furniture and no horses” (p. 425).

In having perpetuity and continuity as part of its essence, the vast conglomerate treasure that Felix describes is similar to the collective wealth of art that Ruskin wishes to see preserved in his atemporal permanent economy. Like that body of work, it is a treasure “carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another,” and, Felix tells his auditors, it is “your own

³⁵ George Eliot, “The Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt” (1868), in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), p. 426. Subsequent citations in the text refer to this edition. The “Address to Working Men” is an essay written in the voice of the hero of Eliot’s 1866 political novel, *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Critics have debated the degree to which Felix speaks for Eliot (see Henry, “George Eliot and Politics”; and Thomas Pinney’s introduction to the essay in *Essays of George Eliot*, p. 415).

inheritance and the inheritance of your children" ("Address to Working Men," pp. 425, 426). Like Ruskin, Felix is above all wary of destruction and change. He decries the misperception that "the preservation of order is the part of a selfish aristocracy and a selfish commercial class" ("Address to Working Men," p. 424). Felix echoes Ruskin's evocation of the "great reciprocal duties . . . constantly exchanged between the living and the dead" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 63), when Felix speaks of the "law by which human lives are linked together" and claims that this law means that "we who are living now are sufferers by the wrong-doing of those who lived before us; we are sufferers by each other's wrong doing; and the children who come after us are and will be sufferers from the same causes" ("Address to Working Men," p. 419).

Felix acknowledges that the treasure he describes "is bound up at present with conditions which have much evil in them," and that "one of the hardships in the lot of working men is that they have been for the most part shut out from sharing in this treasure" ("Address to Working Men," p. 425). He admits to his auditors that "the common estate of society has been anything but common to you" (p. 426), and notes: "we, by the very fact of our privations, our lack of leisure and instruction, are not so likely to be aware of and take into our account" the "many precious benefits" of this treasure (p. 425). Someone who *does* have access to this treasure, he says, will find that "it can make a man's life very great, very full of delight, though he has no smart furniture and no horses: it also yields a great deal of discovery that corrects error, and of invention that lessens bodily pain, and must at last make life easier for all" (p. 425). In making scientific discovery part of the treasure, Felix goes some way toward implying how the treasure "must at last make life easier for all"; it is less clear, however, how the "poetry" or the "refinement of thought, feeling, and manners," to which only a small slice of the population has access, might eventually improve the general well-being.

George Eliot, through Felix, offers the treasure of refined needs as the reason not to redistribute wealth more equitably in the present or the immediate future and, by extension, the reason that those who have wealth may spend it on themselves,

administering to their own refined needs. Echoing Ruskin again in his emphasis on preservation and stasis, Felix tells his listeners: "the security of this treasure demands, not only the preservation of order, but a certain patience on our part with many institutions and facts of various kinds, especially touching the accumulation of wealth" ("Address to Working Men," p. 425). Felix warns the crowd that they must not cause the classes holding the treasure "to withdraw from public affairs"; they must not "stop too suddenly any of the sources by which their leisure and ease are furnished, rob them of the chances by which they may be influential and pre-eminent" (p. 426). To thus claim wealth or power from the classes that currently maintain a grip on them, he asserts, is to "injure your own inheritance and the inheritance of your children" (p. 426). The treasure that benefits all humanity happens to be held by a few, and, for the moment, it must be held in absolute security to ensure its preservation.

Will's and Felix's speeches may be taken to explain each other. In the model presented by each of them, one individual's enjoyment of resources or wealth denied to others is part of a system within which those others are somehow cared for. The immured treasure radiates a glow outside its protecting walls, and the very fact of its safety improves the lives of those who will never come near it. Ruskin describes a similar treasure in *The Political Economy of Art* when he urges accumulation and preservation rather than destruction and supersession; he reminds his auditors that existing art should not be replaced by new art, but that the art of successive generations "should all grow together into one mighty temple" (*The Political Economy of Art*, p. 64). In Will's and Felix's visions, however, many are left outside the temple, and we may wonder just who *is* allowed inside to feel and meet needs refined to such beneficent effect. Dorothea, as heiress to a fortune and an estate, seems like a good candidate for entry into the temple: she is favored by the "many institutions and facts of various kinds" or the "conditions which have much evil in them," which Felix says protect the treasure. But, as we have seen, Dorothea cannot comfortably enjoy, because she cannot forget the pain of others: she refuses to give herself over to pleasure, and insists on standing

outside the temple. In “The Address to Working Men” and in *Middlemarch*, the moment of enjoyment—or consumption—is systematically dislocated from the immediate, either deferred into the future or deflected onto others. This persistent postponement of pleasure recalls the conclusion of *Unto This Last*, where Ruskin announces: “Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruelest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold” (*Unto This Last*, p. 114).

Will and Felix are both reforming political men devoted to improving the lives of the poor and the powerless. Yet these political reformers serve as the voices for a societal ideal that valorizes the preservation of accumulated wealth and existing structures of power. Through these characters, revolutionary ardor is safely reabsorbed into conservatism. Critics sometimes read *Middlemarch* as a triumphantly bourgeois novel that depicts Dorothea’s progress from her old inherited estate into the modern middle class, where she will be the supportive wife of an “ardent public man” who works for reform in a representative democratic system; as a good bourgeoisie, Dorothea “will learn what everything costs” and participate in the modern industrial economy (*Middlemarch*, pp. 822, 801). But as an “ardent public man,” Will is relatively impotent. We know his ardor to be in vain before he even begins to exercise it, when the narrator speaks of him “working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days” (p. 822). Will’s foray into reforming representative government is followed in the next generation by his son’s return to Dorothea’s hereditary home and rank: Tipton Grange, we learn, is “inherited by Dorothea’s son, who might have represented Middlemarch, but declined, thinking that his opinions had less chance of being stifled if he remained out of doors” (p. 824). The hopeful public-minded father of the 1830s is replaced in the 1860s by his more cynical and more privately oriented son.

Middlemarch does not in the end represent the bourgeoisie ascendant; instead, it represents the perpetuation of a line and the retention of property within a family of good blood.

Symbolically speaking, Dorothea's decision to marry Will is not primarily an embrace of political reform that will redistribute power and wealth, nor is it primarily a commitment to join the modern consumer economy. Quite to the contrary, it is for her a renunciation of the sort that she has always liked making. Her way of telling Will that she will marry him is to say, "I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth"; a few moments later she adds: "We could live quite well on my own fortune—it is too much—seven hundred a-year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs" (*Middlemarch*, p. 801). Critics have argued that this promise to learn what everything costs is Dorothea's promise to purchase her way into bourgeois domesticity.³⁶ But its more obvious implied meaning is far more relevant: Dorothea is simply promising to consume less.

The habits of consumption that fuel a modern industrial economy driven by the insatiable desires of a credit-spending middle class are represented in *Middlemarch* by Lydgate and Rosamond. Yet these are not the habits that rise triumphant at the novel's end. Rather, Dorothea's Ruskinian economics of philanthropy and renunciation dominate the close of the story. And with her son's inheritance of Tipton Grange and his decision not to participate in national government, the Ruskinian politics that honor hereditary wealth and power win out over the representative democratic politics of reform that so briefly and so deceptively flourish during Will's career. The domination of Ruskinian economics within the novel means that an archaic feudal relation between the powerful and the less powerful persists.

The scene in which Dorothea pledges herself to Will closely resembles its analogue in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, where Esther Lyon pledges herself to the eponymous radical.³⁷ In

³⁶ Freedgood writes: "Dorothea's promise to understand value in the rationalized terms of money is of course the key to her descent (which in the novel's thematic terms is an ascent) into the middle class" (*The Ideas in Things*, p. 119). Frank Christianson also reads Dorothea's words to signal an entry into the middle class and to emphasize "the economic cast of their engagement," allowing them to "represent a model of modern philanthropy" (Christianson, *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot, and Howells* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007], p. 157).

³⁷ Yeazell argues that "social and political anxieties are contained" in the courtship plots of political novels. She sees *Felix Holt* exchange "a narrative that threatens drastic change for one that proves reassuringly static" ("Why Political Novels Have Heroines,"

both novels, the sign of a woman's moral quality is her decision to abstain from consuming by marrying a poor man who will devote his life to promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth in society. And in both novels, the ardent political groom has views that actually commit him to the conservation of the existing order rather than the redistribution he stands for. Politics and economic consumption intermingle in these plots because, for George Eliot, the question of consumption is a question about one's obligations to other people. Having taught us to feel for others, Eliot faces the problem of marking out a line at which we can cease to do so. She asks us to understand that when we spend money, we least provisionally mark out that line, whether we intend to or not.

We can read Will's statement about enjoyment as setting out an upper limit at which sympathy may legitimately end. This limit is the aesthetic pleasure found in "refinement." Beauty, especially beauty that provides "intellectual or emotional" pleasure, gives us license finally to stop listening to the roar of human pain that always lies on the other side of silence. This is a very uncomfortable limit to set—for us, and also for George Eliot. Through the end of *Middlemarch*, even after an education into greater aesthetic and political-economic knowledge, part of Dorothea's nobility remains her continuing insistence upon renunciation. She never develops a habit of enjoying the pleasures of the immense expense of art, because she cannot forget the pain of others. The only evidence that she ever follows Will's injunction to enjoy is that she makes him her husband; her marriage is in that sense her one self-gratifying act.

Even as George Eliot and Ruskin propose that, for now, existing concentrations of wealth and power must be protected so that the treasure of art may continue to be enjoyed, they implicitly or explicitly endorse a habit of self-denial that prohibits or discourages such enjoyment. They echo the eighteenth-century moral philosophers in presenting the category of the

p. 127). Elliott sees a different model for containment in the novel's conclusion: she notes that political wives were becoming important during the 1860s, and argues that Dorothea projects her ambitions onto Will, so that "she can still share them by becoming one with him in marriage" (*The Angel out of the House*, p. 212).

aesthetic as a means of legitimizing select modes of consumption; but for them, as for Dorothea, this strategy for regulation ultimately fails. Both Eliot and Ruskin suggest that, for the sake of authentic pleasure in what is called art, we may in good conscience temporarily forget the pain of others—but neither author is willing to follow through on this suggestion. Ruskin will not cleanly separate art from luxury, and George Eliot will not have her modern Theresa do the forgetting that she declares permissible. The author of *Middlemarch* makes aesthetic pleasure a point at which we *may* legitimately stop sympathizing, but she stops far short of telling us that we *must* do so, and she gives us instead a smart, serious heroine who would not dream of it. Dorothea's anxiety about consumption is never resolved, and neither, perhaps, is George Eliot's.

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ABSTRACT

Emily Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art’: George Eliot and John Ruskin on Consumption and the Limits of Sympathy” (pp. 214–245)

This essay attempts to better our understanding of George Eliot's conservatism by examining a body of ideas about consumption and moral obligation that she and John Ruskin share. I use a discussion of consumer ethics to explore the moral logic of their conservatism by examining the role of the aesthetic within it. Economic consumption and the aesthetic are subjects inextricably connected, not just because the discourses of political economy and aesthetics have a shared origin in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, but also because the discourse of aesthetics has long served to legitimize select modes and acts of consumption. By marking out a limit where one may reasonably cease to sympathize and instead devote energy (and money) to personal gratification, the treatment of consumption in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) offers an important articulation of moral thought. Eliot suggests that aesthetic pleasure can make consumption morally defensible, but she also anticipates Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the aesthetic: her novel represents both the display of cultural capital and the exercise of the aesthetic disposition as ways of maintaining social and economic hierarchies. She thus at once critiques and participates in the system within which the aesthetic functions to preserve social and political stasis. Using John Ruskin's economic writings to expose *Middlemarch* as a novel of consumer ethics, this essay examines Eliot's representation of personal economic consumption as an emergent mode of social and political agency that might operate productively within that stasis.

Keywords: George Eliot; John Ruskin; *Middlemarch*; consumption; ethics