THE INVISIBLE HAND: SUPERNATURAL AGENCY IN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE GOTHIC NOVEL

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Few passages have been quoted as often as the following from Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations (1776), in which he represents the self-regulating capacity of the market as “an invisible hand” inevitably plotting the economic process towards a final state of equilibrium:

He [the merchant] generally indeed neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends . . . only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.1

Although this figure of “an invisible hand” reconciling private and social interest has generated prolific citation and interpretation, it has never been subjected to a literal reading by linking it to the contemporary literary genre of the gothic novel, where it plays a prominent role as well.2 In the founding text of this literary tradition, Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764), the reader also encounters “an invisible hand” causing a disjunction between an action’s intention and its result. After the villain Manfred has declared to Isabella his “impious intentions” of “marrying” her, his attempt to assault her sexually is thwarted by an animated portrait that leads him to a chamber, whose door is then violently shut by an invisible hand:

Isabella . . . who dreaded nothing so much as Manfred’s pursuit of his declaration, cried, . . . see heaven itself declares against your impious intentions! - Heaven nor hell shall impede my designs, said Manfred, advancing again to seize the princess. At that instant the portrait of his grandfather . . . uttered a deep sigh and heaved its breast. . . . Manfred, distracted between the flight of Isabella . . . and his inability to keep his eyes from the picture, which began to move, had however advanced some steps after her, still looking backwards on the portrait, when he
saw it quit its panel, and descend on the floor. . . . [T]he vision sighed again, and made a sign to Manfred to follow him. Lead on! cried Manfred . . . The spectre marched . . . to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand. Manfred accompanied him at a little distance, full of anxiety and horror, but resolved. As he would have entered the chamber, the door was clapped to with violence by an invisible hand. The prince, collecting courage from this delay, would have forcibly burst the door with his foot, but found that it resisted his utmost efforts.  

In Walpole’s text, as in Smith’s, the original intentions of actions are superseded by the intervention of an “invisible hand,” but Smith represents the economic reconciliation of individual and social interest as the natural, ordinary course of events, whereas the frustration of Manfred’s “impious intentions” is effected by supernatural rather than natural agency. This difference may seem to render the proposed linkage between political economy and the gothic novel implausible or negligible—as if their interrelation were one of mutual rejection rather than exchange. Yet exactly this type of supernatural agency is conjured by Adam Smith’s first use of the phrase “invisible hand,” which does not, as one might expect, occur in his Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) but even earlier in an essay on “The History of Astronomy.”  

Smith describes here the origin of polytheism among “savages,” locating it in irregular natural events like “comets, eclipses, thunder, [and] lightning . . . which exasperate his [the savage’s] sentiment into terror and consternation.” This “terror,” which is treated by Edmund Burke—citing the same examples—as the source of the sublime, induces the “savage” to ascribe these events to “some invisible and designing power”:

Hence the origin of Polytheism, and of that vulgar superstition which ascribes all the irregular events of nature to the favour or displeasure of intelligent, though invisible beings, to gods, daemons, witches, genii, fairies. For it may be observed, that in all Polytheistic religions . . . it is the irregular events of nature only that are ascribed to the agency and power of their gods. Fire burns, and water refreshes: heavy bodies descend, and lighter substances fly upwards, by the necessity of their own nature; nor was the invisible hand of Jupiter ever apprehended to be employed in those matters. But thunder and lightning, storms and sunshine, those more irregular events, were ascribed to his favour, or his anger.  

The apparent opposition between supernatural agency in Walpole’s Castle of Otranto and natural agency in Smith’s Wealth of Nations resurfaces here within Smith’s own writings: the “savage” perceives the
“invisible hand of Jupiter” in irregular, seemingly supernatural events but not in regularly descending bodies. The economist, on the other hand, resorts to the figure of “an invisible hand” to refer to the regular and natural course of the market. This inversion from “the invisible hand of Jupiter,” disrupting the regular descent of heavy bodies, to an impersonal “invisible hand,” which causes the “gravitating [of the nominal] . . . towards the natural price” (WN, 1:67; my emphasis), can be grasped as a naturalization of the supernatural? The same process of reversal, however, simultaneously poses the threat of introducing the supernatural into the natural.

As the metaphor of “gravitating prices” suggests, the social science of political economy seeks to follow the model of the natural sciences in discovering hidden, regular laws behind nature’s sensible appearances. This modelling function of the natural sciences seems to be confirmed by Joseph Glanvill’s scientific treatise The Vanity of Dogmatizing (1661) which, a hundred years earlier, already employs the same figure to represent the regular course of nature. Glanvill invokes the simile of the hidden wheels of a watch to which he compares “Nature work[ing] by an Invisible Hand in all things.” But the same tropes of invisible agency pervade Glanvill’s Saducismus Triumphatus (1681), a posthumously published, expanded version of his Philosophical Endeavor in the Defence of the Being of Witches and Apparitions (1668)—just as the peculiar naturalization of the supernatural marking Smith’s writings can be observed in The Mysteries of Udolpho and many other gothic novels following Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto as well.

Already in Walpole’s novel the introduction of supernatural elements into the narrative space serves a determinate function comparable to Smith’s representation of the economic process as narrative, whose resolution or closure—the economic equilibrium—is ascribed to the market’s “invisible hand.” The violent disruptions by the supernatural dominating Walpole’s novel from the very beginning—Conrad, Manfred’s son, being “dashed to pieces” (O, 16) by a giant helmet unaccountably falling from the sky—seem to create an arbitrary disorder. They excite the same “popular terrors and suspicions of witchcraft,” to which Smith compares the “popular fear” (WN, 2:41) created by the seemingly inexplicable movements of the corn price. Just as a sudden rise in corn prices is imputed to the “innocent” (WN, 2:41) corntraders, Theodore is wrongly accused of being a “necromancer” (O, 19) by Manfred. But despite their apparent arbitrariness, the interventions by the supernatural perform an indispensable function for the unfolding of the novel’s plot, which rests on a “primacy [of] . . . genealogy.”

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title to Otranto is founded on murder, has to be exposed as an usurper, and the rightful heir Theodore has to be revealed and re-instated. This “return to a genealogical equilibrium,” is, however, not “disrupted or punctuated” by the supernatural; it is effected by it. If Manfred’s attempt to rape Isabella were not prevented by the intervention of “an invisible hand,” the genealogical equilibrium which had been disturbed before the novel’s beginning would be irretrievably lost. The supernatural agents are “agents of providence” introduced into an already disordered narrative space to expose the villain Manfred and to reveal the true heir Theodore. The “invisible hand” closing the door behind Manfred is “the hand of Providence stretched out” (O, 80) against him, and Theodore, who aids Isabella in her flight from Manfred, is right in claiming the assistance of providence in their escape: “Providence, that delivered me from the helmet, was able to direct me to the spring of a lock” (O, 28).

At certain points, however, the frequency and monstrosity of supernatural interposition lead to a loss of authorial control in Walpole’s novel, undermining its “principal engine”—“terror” (O, 4)—by “exciting laughter . . . instead of attention,” as Clara Reeve remarks in the preface to The Castle of Otranto’s “literary offspring” The Old English Baron (1778). Walpole himself displays a curious uneasiness concerning the supernatural elements of his novel by posing in the first edition as translator of an ancient Catholic manuscript needing “some apology, [since] miracles . . . and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances” (O, 4). This defensive gesture anticipates the critical reactions to Walpole’s novel, whose employment of a supernatural machinery was attacked in The Critical Review as a resort to “rotten material.” Ironically, even Walpole’s staged suspicion that the manuscript was written “by an artful priest . . . to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions” (O, 3) becomes a recurring figure in the enlightened attacks on the gothic novel for its employment of preternatural elements:

Of all the resources of invention, this, perhaps, is the most puerile, as it is certainly among the most unphilosophic [sic]. It contributes to keep alive that superstition which debilitates the mind, that ignorance which propagates error, and that dread of invisible agency which makes inquiry criminal.

In order to escape similar denunciations and to avoid the “redundancy” of the “marvellous” (OEB, 4) she herself condemns in Walpole’s The
Castle of Otranto, Clara Reeve restricts the supernatural and subjects it
to a gradual concealment in The Old English Baron (1778), first
published as The Champion of Virtue (1777).

The narrative interest of The Old English Baron is virtually identical
to that of The Castle of Otranto: both novels represent the restoration of
genealogical equilibrium. But whereas in Walpole’s text the invisible
hand intervenes quite tangibly by closing a door, it is transmuted in
Reeve’s text into the more abstract principle “of the over-ruling hand of
Providence” guaranteeing “the certainty of RETRIBUTION” (OEB,
153). Supernatural agency is not represented directly any more, but is
postulated in the gaps of the sometimes illegible manuscript. Edmund’s
enemies are surprised that “every attempt [they] . . . make to humble
this upstart, turns into applause, and serves only to raise his pride still
higher” (OEB, 27–28). The frustration of their schemes is, however, not
represented directly but displaced to the gaps within the narrative
whose function of producing “obscurity” will later be replaced by the
fainting spells in Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794).
Without recounting any details, the narrative only relates that “provi-
dence interposed in his [Edmund’s] behalf; and, by seemingly accidental
circumstances, conducted him imperceptibly towards the crisis of his
fate” (OEB, 32; my emphasis). Reeve’s naturalization of supernatural
agency becomes most explicit when Edmund, the wronged heir, states,
“heaven assists us by natural means” (OEB, 63; my emphasis). Simulta-
neously, the figure of “an invisible hand” is contained by embedding it in
a dream which foreshadows Philip’s combat with the usurper Walter:

During his [Sir Philip’s] sleep, many strange and incoherent dreams
arose to his imagination . . . Presently after, he thought he was hurried
away by an invisible hand, and led into a wild heath, where the people
were inclosing the ground, and making preparations for two combat-
ants; the trumpet sounded, and a voice called out still louder, Forbear!
It is not permitted to be revealed till the time is ripe for the event: Wait
with patience on the decrees of Heaven. (OEB, 13–14; my emphasis)

In comparison to Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, the workings of the
“invisible hand” become less tangible in Reeve’s The Old English Baron.
Nonetheless both novels partake in the same “delight . . . in uncovering
and emphasizing the unintended results of human action” displayed by
Adam Smith.16

A very explicit statement of the narrative pattern prevalent through-
out the gothic novel—that providence counteracts the villain’s actions in
such a way that their consequences are not only “no part of his

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intention” (WN, 1.447) but its exact reverse—can be found in Eliza Parson’s The Castle of Wolfenbach (1793). After Count Wolfenbach, the novel’s villain, has recognized the “hand of providence” in the frustration of his schemes, he is finally converted and confesses to his wife, whom he had tried to kill:

I now thank heaven that both you and Joseph are alive, and adore the way of Providence, who extracts good out of evil, and made the very crimes I intended to perpetrate the means of deliverance to you both.  

Thus in the didactic and sentimental versions of the gothic novel, where “we generally see [that] the very means . . . [the villains] take to hide their crimes from a knowledge of the world, are productive of such events as lead to their detection,” the supernatural interventions manipulating disorder into order are gradually concealed. In Ann Radcliffe’s novels the “invisible hand” has become truly invisible—Radcliffe’s “weak hand . . . record[ing]” The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) is much more efficient and concealed in plot organization than Walpole’s, as the self-regulating system of sensibility attains its final state of sentimental equilibrium without any tangible supernatural interpositions. Tropes of invisible agency remain marginal and restricted to a figurative level. Nevertheless in her novels, the “punishment” of the “vicious” is “certain,” while “innocence . . . finally triumph[s] over misfortune.” Emily and Valancourt, who abstain from any active pursuit of their interests, finally gain happiness, while Montoni, who does pursue his own interest, reaches the very opposite of his intentions. Hence, in the pursuit of his schemes, the villain of the gothic novel advances social interest without knowing and without intending it.

Turning back to Adam Smith—this time to his Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759)—we find exactly the same principle of an “invisible hand” overruling selfish individual intentions:

It is to no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them. The homely and vulgar proverb that the eye is larger than the belly, never was more fully verified than with regard to him. The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires. . . . The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and most agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own convenience, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and

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insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.  

This justification of social inequality by an argument that replicates the narrative pattern of the didactic gothic novel presupposes a “natural” limit of consumption—an assumption which Smith himself undercuts in The Wealth of Nations, where he concedes that, although oral consumption may be limited “by the narrow capacity of the human stomach,” there is no limit to “artificial” refinement.

The rich man consumes no more food than his poor neighbour. In quality it may be very different, and to select and prepare it may require more labour and art; but in quantity it is very nearly the same. But compare the spacious palace and great wardrobe of the one, with the hovel and the few rags of the other, and you will be sensible that the difference between their clothing, lodging, and household furniture, is almost as great in quantity as it is in quality. The desire of food is limited in every man by the narrow capacity of the human stomach; but the desire of the conveniences and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seems to have no limit or certain boundary. (WN, 1:183; my emphasis)

The sublimity of a consumption without limits or boundaries threatens to render the reconciliation of private and social interest impossible. In order to assert the inevitable promotion of social welfare by the pursuit of private interest, Smith has to emphasize the unintended consequences of consumption for the “consuming villains” who—in the late eighteenth century—belong almost exclusively to the declining aristocracy. The opaque and concealed process of a developing international market creates a supply of new, hitherto unknown luxuries, thereby undermining the social position of the feudal lords who sell, for the satisfaction of their “vain” desires, the foundation of their power:

But what all the violence of the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about. These gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their lands, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers. All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the
world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind. As soon, therefore, as they could find a method of consuming the whole value of their rents themselves, they had no disposition to share them with any other person. For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the maintenance, or what is the same thing, the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them. . . .

Thus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and the most sordid of all vanities, they gradually bartered their whole power and authority. (WN, 1:437; my emphasis)

This usage of tropes of invisible agency—"the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures" undermining private interests and promoting that of society as a whole—is much more faithful to the gothic novel grounding Smith's figure of "an invisible hand" than his representation of the bourgeois merchant in whom private and social interest miraculously coincide. In contrast to that particular instance of reconciliation, here the imperceptible operation of the market frustrates the individual and exclusively promotes the social interest.

But before unfolding this tension between the gothic novel and political economy in their respective representations of self-denial and the (il)legitimate pursuit of self-interest, it is necessary to address the specific argumentative function of the "invisible hand" in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith introduces this figure in the book *On Systems of Political Economy*, which criticizes mercantilistic theories that equate capital with money. The "popular notion" that "wealth consists in money, or in gold and silver" (WN, 1:450) leads to demands for governmental regulatory interventions in "foreign commerce" in order to produce an influx of gold and silver. Smith attacks these theories and argues that the self-regulating capacity of the market renders external interventions by the state unnecessary or even counter-productive.25 "Artificial" interventions disturb the "natural" flow of capital and turn it "from a more, to a less advantageous employment" (WN, 1:479). Hence, according to Smith, "the exchangeable value of [a nation's] . . . annual produce instead of being increased, according to the intention of the lawgiver, must necessarily be diminished by every such regulation" (WN, 1:479; my emphasis). Yet Smith is unable to grasp this miraculous process of self-regulation or *tatonnement* conceptually, since he can offer no explanation of how the movement from disequilibrium to equilibrium is actually effected. It is precisely this gap within his economic argumentation that is closed by the figure of the "invisible
hand.” Smith resorts to this metonymy less to legitimize the bourgeois merchant pursuing his private interest than to represent the self-regulating capacity of the market which he cannot describe in purely economic terms. However, given the lack of a conceptual economic foundation for this trope, it necessarily relies on the language of the supernatural, whose figures of invisible agency pervade not only the gothic novel, but intrude also upon Smith’s economic treatise. Smith implicitly postulates by this figure a hidden or imperceptible supernatural intervention that is already at work within the economic sphere, thus rendering external interventions by the state unnecessary. He can reject the mercantilist demand for state intervention only by a hidden recourse to supernatural intervention.

Thus the naturalization of supernatural agency marking Smith’s writings remains incomplete. After the transformation of “the invisible hand of Jupiter,” disrupting nature’s regular course by lightning or thunder, into its functional opposite, an impersonal “invisible hand,” which steers the economic process to its final state of equilibrium, the market itself becomes a giant invisible actor. Smith’s “invisible hand” conjures the same “providential manipulation of disorder into order” effected by the supernatural agents in Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto.

In his introduction to the chapters on the “principles which regulate the exchangeable value of commodities,” Smith himself admits that the supernatural rather than natural agency of the market retreats from representation in the same way that it does in Reeve’s Old English Baron:

> I shall endeavour to explain . . . those . . . subjects in the following . . . chapters, for which I must earnestly entreat both the patience and the attention of the reader: his patience in order to examine a detail which may perhaps in some places appear unnecessarily tedious; and his attention in order to understand what may, perhaps, after the fullest explication which I am capable of giving of it, appear still in some degree obscure. . . . [S]ome obscurity may still appear to remain upon a subject in its own nature extremely abstracted. (WN, 1:33; my emphasis)

In a strange way, Smith here almost seems to wish that “some obscurity” still remain on his subject of the hidden principles regulating prices, as if he, like Clara Reeve or Ann Radcliffe, had read Burke’s appraisal of obscurity as a necessary condition of dread: “To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary.” Possibly against Smith’s own intention, the lack or impossibility of a purely literal representation of economic self-regulation places him in that “dungeon

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of metaphorical obscurity" he himself denounces in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. In these lectures, Smith not only favors the "Newtonian style" of deducing even those "phenomena . . . reckoned the most unaccountable" from "one principle" over the Aristotelian style that gives "a new [principle] . . . for every phaenomenon"; he also argues that tropes and figures should only be used "sparingly"—only in those cases "when they are more proper than the common forms of speaking," that is, when a literal expression is unavailable. According to Smith, figurative language has "no intrinsick worth." On the contrary, it always threatens to obstruct that "perspicuity" which should mark scientific writing:

What are generally called ornaments or flowers in language, as allegorical, metaphorical, and such like expressions are very apt to make ones stile dark and perplex'd. Studying much to vary the expression leads one also frequently into a dungeon of metaphorical obscurity. What is striking about this passage is not only that Smith condemns figurative language while simultaneously employing the metaphor "dungeon of metaphorical obscurity," but even more importantly that language itself here becomes the source of obscurity. The author imprisoned in this "dungeon" of figurative language could only be freed by a literal or purely conceptual language not contaminating or undermining his argumentation. Yet this language seems unavailable in The Wealth of Nations, which borrows not only metaphors from the natural sciences to represent the "gravitation" of prices, but also tropes of invisible agency from the gothic novel—as if Walpole's representation of Manfred literally imprisoned by "an invisible hand" prefigures Smith's confinement within the language of the gothic novel. Not only the "invisible hand" but also the "dungeon" belong—if taken literally—to the linguistic sphere of the gothic novel, whose "rotten material" contaminates Smith's economic treatise.

Smith's strong reliance on the foreign words of the gothic novel, which resist a complete appropriation in his writings, is the more surprising if one takes into account the strong tension between their representations of self-denial and self-interest. While affirming Smith's emphasis on the unintended consequences of human action and his appeal to supernatural interventions that render state regulations of the economic sphere unnecessary, the gothic novel at the same time undercuts his presupposition that the pursuit of private interest is morally legitimate or reconcilable with social welfare. Whereas Smith
considers “regard to our own private happiness and interest...” very
laudable principles of action” (TMS, 454) and states that not “much
good [could] be done by those who affected to trade for the public
good” (WN, 1:478), the gothic novel—at least in its sentimental ver-
sion—preaches self-denial instead of self-interest.32 Eliza Parson’s The
Castle of Wolfenbach explicitly states that “after a variety of strange and
melancholy incidents, Matilda received the reward of her steadiness,
fortitude, and virtuous self-denial,” and Emily and Valancourt renounce
any overt effort to attain happiness in Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of
Udolpho as well.33 In Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Theodore and
Matilda, who are unwilling to sacrifice the prospect of their “happy
union,” are even punished by the “invisible hand.”34 Thus—according to
the gothic novel—only those “who affect to trade for the public good”
are rewarded for their virtuous self-denial. Smith’s representation of the
bourgeois merchant is even more faithful to the providential reconcilia-
tion of private and social interest than the gothic novel, which undercuts
the belief in a miraculous coincidence of private and public interest.

In her powerful reading of Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho,
Mary Poovey also emphasizes this “potentially subversive” discrepancy
between “economic forces” and “sentimental values” in Radcliffe’s
novel.35 However, she conceives of this tension between political
eco
omy and the gothic novel not as occurring within a textual network of
mutual exchange and rejection, but as “contradictions” between
“sentimental ideology” and “actual economic and political conditions”:

Through her depiction of Montoni... Radcliffe delivers her... most
telling critique of sensibility: this is... the masculine passion of
unregulated, individualistic, avaricious desire... [T]he surfacing of this
force as a figure in Radcliffe’s fiction attests to the remarkable ability to
penetrate the surface of the sentimental ideology, to see through to its
economic base.36

Poovey’s rhetoric of “uncovering” or “unmasking” hidden or invisible
antagonisms behind the sensible surface of ideology unconsciously
replicates Smith’s poetics of invisible agency. Although she avoids the
words “hidden” or “invisible,” her extensive use of words like “uncover,”
“unmask,” or of “contradictions... becoming apparent” implies the
invisibility or hiddenness of the economic base she sets out to uncover.37
As a detailed outline of the migration of these figures—from Smith’s
“invisible hand” via Hegel’s List der Vernunft [cunning of reason], which
“operates in the background,” to Marx—is beyond the scope of this
paper, it may suffice to point at only one instance of this reproduction of

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Smith's tropes in Marx's and Engels's writings. In *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* Engels ascribes the unintended, seemingly accidental consequences of human actions to hidden interior laws operating in history:

Die Zwecke der Handlungen sind gewollt, aber die Resultate, die wirklich aus den Handlungen folgen, sind nicht gewollt, oder soweit sie dem gewollten Zweck zunächst doch zu entsprechen scheinen, haben sie schließlich ganz andere als die gewollten Folgen. Die geschichtlichen Ereignisse erscheinen so ... als von der Zufälligkeit beherrscht. Wo aber auf der Oberfläche der Zufall sein Spiel treibt, da wird er stets durch innere verborgene Gesetze beherrscht.\footnote{The aims of actions are intended, but the results which really follow from those actions are unintended, or, insofar as they first seem to comply with the intended aim, they finally have consequences completely differing from the intended ones. Thus the historical events appear to be ruled by contingency. But while chance plays its game on the surface, it is always determined by interior, hidden laws.}

This ascription of seemingly contingent accidents to hidden laws operating in history replicates Hegel’s account of political economy as discovering “necessary laws” behind a “conglomerate of contingencies.”\footnote{But it can also be linked to the following passage from Karl August Grosse’s *Schauerroman Der Genius* (1791–95):}

Aus allen Verwickelungen von scheinbaren Zufällen blickt eine unsichtbare Hand hervor, welche vielleicht über manchem unter uns schwelt, ihn im Dunkel beherrscht.\footnote{Behind all tangles of seeming accidents an invisible hand lurks which may hover over some, guiding him in the dark.}

In the same way as Grosse postulates the working of an “invisible hand” behind apparent accidents or as Reeve represents providence as “interposing imperceptibly ... by seemingly accidental circumstances,” Marx conceives of history as a teleological narrative organized by hidden laws. Marx’s representation of the bourgeois class coincides with Smith’s narrative on the decline of the feudal aristocracy. While pursuing its class-interest, the bourgeoisie, without intending it and without knowing it, promotes a process which is the exact reverse of its intention—the proletarian revolution. According to Marx, capitalist production produces its own negation “with the necessity of a natural process.”\footnote{Thus the materialist attempt to give a causal explanation to the interrelation of political economy and the gothic novel by turning both discourses into epiphenomena of the developing capitalist market—}
place would unconsciously replicate those very tropes and figures whose emergence it strives in vain to explain or interpret. Reading, for instance, the emergence of the gothic novel as a literary allegory of the social decline of the aristocracy necessarily presupposes the invisible agency of the market as determining or overruling authorial intentions.

Another way of explaining the figurative and narrative parallels between political economy and the gothic novel would be the proof of a mutual “influence” between novelists and economists suggested by David Hume’s letter to Smith of 1759, written shortly after the publication of The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Hume informs Smith that among the persons to whom he had sent copies of Smith’s book to “spread its reputation” was a certain Horace Walpole. Thus it appears possible that Walpole consciously cited Smith’s passage on the “proud and unfeeling landlord” when he wrote The Castle of Otranto. However, in a letter to Rev. William Cole from March 1763, Walpole himself gives a very different account of the “origin” of his novel:

Shell I even confess to you what was the origin of this romance? I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase was a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands, and I grew fond of it.

Instead of establishing a conscious citation of Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments, this account of the novel’s “origin” itself comes close to replicating the figure of “an invisible hand.” Walpole does not state that his authorial intention was overruled by his dream of a “gigantic hand in armour,” he simply begins to write “without knowing what [he] intended to say.” Yet this figure of “a gigantic hand in armour”—a metonymy of the invisible giant Alfonso whose disclosure ends the novel—becomes the “hand of providence” in Walpole’s novel—as if Smith’s “invisible hand” grew on Walpole’s “hands” without him noticing, just as Walpole’s work “grows” on Smith’s economic writings behind Smith’s authorial intention.

The figure of the “invisible hand” is, indeed, so powerful that it not only infiltrates a materialist as well as an author-centered or intentionalist attempt to give a causal explanation to the circulation of rhetorical tropes and narrative patterns between political economy and the gothic novel; it also generates prolific citation. As the invisible hand leads, this

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peculiar power to provoke citation may reflect a fear of autonomy, a
desire of being led. Yet the exclusive attention to a figure, occurring only
once in a text of more than thousand pages, is not triggered before the late
nineteenth century. After the first publication of The Wealth of Nations in
1776 the figure of “an invisible hand” is quoted neither in the lengthy,
serialized reviews appearing in The Critical Review and The Monthly
Review, nor in other early critical responses such as Thomas Pownall’s
Letter to Adam Smith (1776) or John Gray’s The Essential Principles of the
Wealth of Nations (1797).44 By 1814 David Buchanan praises Smith for
“having laid the foundation of a new science”—a view carried forward in the
economic writings of Malthus, Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, John Ray
McCulloch, and others.45 But, instead of quoting the “invisible hand,” all
these authors choose to paraphrase Smith’s “insight” into how the pursuit of
private interest necessarily promotes social interest.46

An astonishing instance of this reticence in citing the “invisible hand”
is to be found in Henry Thomas Buckle’s influential History of Civiliza-
tion in England (1859). After acclaiming The Wealth of Nations as
“probably the most important book which has ever been written,”
Buckle goes on to state, “one of the peculiar features of [the] . . . book”
was “to show, that men, in promoting their own interest, will uninten-
tionally promote the interest of others,” a principle he sets out to
present at length:

[H]is [every man’s] sole motive will be his own private profit. And it is
well that such should be the case. For, by thus pursuing his personal
interest, he aids society more than if his views were generous and
exalted. Some people affect to carry on trade for the good of others; but
this is mere affection, though, to say the truth, it is an affection, not
very common among merchants, and many words are not needed to
dissuade them from so foolish a practice.  *
*By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the
society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I
have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for
the public good. It is an affection, indeed, not very common among
merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them
from it.47

Buckle’s paraphrase as well as his footnote, quoting only the sentences
following Smith’s invocation of an “invisible hand,” actively repress the
metonymy, as if Buckle were embarrassed by a trope whose linkage to the
language of the supernatural is still visible during the nineteenth century.48

It is not before the first decades of this century that the “invisible
hand” is assigned the status of “very often quoted” or “celebrated” in the
histories of political economy. Yet today the figure of the “invisible hand,” although occurring only once in The Wealth of Nations, has come to figure the whole of Smith’s writings, to an extent surpassing the attention paid to certain passages in Marx or Freud. The “invisible hand” has become the “proper” figure figuring Smith. This singular conjuring up of a figure which then, over the course of two centuries, escapes control, which incorporates or absorbs a voluminous work, simultaneously rendering its linkage to the language of the supernatural invisible, appears gothic in itself. Instead of ridiculing Smith’s employment of the gothic novel’s “rotten material,” I am therefore giving in to the temptation to end this essay by citing it one more time. It almost seems as if Adam Smith, who only intends to write an economic Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, is led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention: the writing of a gothic novel.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Stephen Greenblatt, Cathy Mitchell, and Erin Obodine for their suggestions and comments. I am especially indebted to Eric Neiman and Jeffrey S. Timon.


2 Citations and interpretations of the “invisible hand” are too numerous to list in detail here. The prevailing interpretation within contemporary economics can be exemplified by Arrow and Hahn, who consider Smith’s “invisible hand” as a “poetic expression” of “the notion that a social system moved by independent actors in pursuit of different values is consistent with a final coherent state of balance,” an insight which they acclaim as “surely the most important intellectual contribution that economic thought has made to the general understanding of social processes” (General Competitive Analysis [Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1983], 1).

A rare exception to the negligence in, or resistance to, reading the figure is Niklas Luhmann’s compelling proposal that the rationalist repudiation of particular providence (proridentia specialis) in favor of explanations of providential operations through second causes not at variance with the new sciences may have produced the transformation of “the finger of God” into the “invisible hand” (Ökologische Kommunikation: Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen? [Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986], 93 n. 7 and 181). Luhmann’s hypothesis is supported by Walter Clayton’s The Invisible Hand: A Tale (New York, 1815), where the title-giving metaphor is explicitly linked to God’s finger: “This is the finger of God” (25).


3 Adam Smith, “The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries.

5 "History of Astronomy," 47 (my emphasis).
6 "History of Astronomy," 48, 49 (my emphasis). The "primitive" mechanism of ascribing "unexpected event[s] to the arbitrary will of some designing, though invisible beings" is also described in Smith's The History of Ancient Physics (Smith, The Early Writings, 117, my emphasis).
7 See also: "The natural price, therefore, is, as it were, the central price, to which the prices of all commodities are continually gravitating" (WN, 1:65).
8 Joseph Glanvill, The Vanity of Dogmatizing: or Confidence in Opinions, Manifested in a Discourse of the Shortness and Uncertainty of our Knowledge, and its Causes, With some Reflections on Peripateticism, and an Apology for Philosophy (London, 1661), 179–80 (my emphasis; Glanvill's emphasis deleted).
9 Joseph Glanvill, A Philosophical Enquiry in the Defence of the Being of Witches and Apparitions (London, 1688); Joseph Glanvill, Saducismus Triumphatus: or, Plain and Plain Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions, in Two Parts. The First treating of their Possibility, The Second of their Real Existence, 2 vols. (London, 1681). In contrast to his Vanity of Dogmatizing, here Glanvill sets out to prove the existence of angelic as well as of diabolic "invisible intellectual Agents" (Saducismus, 1:7). His "collection of relations" includes a letter by Henri Moore describing the intervention of "some invisible Hand" (Saducismus, 1:13) at the very moment when a "sceptick" denies the existence of spirits. The parallel between Glanvill's demonology and his representation of nature's hidden agency is also evident in his assertion of the "witch's" ability to "fascinate" her victims by the power of her eyes: "which way of acting by subtle and invisible instruments, is ordinary and familiar in all natural efficiences" (Saducismus, 1:83; my emphasis; Glanvill's emphasis deleted).
11 Mishra, 61.
18 Parson, 91. This does not hold true for those gothic novels which release the
supernatural from its providential context instead of restraining it. In Matthew Lewis's *The Monk: A Romance* (1796; ed. Howard Anderson [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973]) supernatural agency is demonic rather than benign, since Matilda’s “invisible servants” (270), who assist Ambrosio’s “laudable design” (269) of raping his sister, are “infernal Agents” (270). The proliferation of tropes of invisible agency in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth The Wanderer: A Tale* (1820; ed. Douglas Grant [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988]) undoes any attempt to assign it an unequivocal role. On the one hand, the “invisible hand” (183) “repelling” Alonzo from the altar seems to belong to the “invisible God” (195; see also 390), on the other hand, there are instances where invisible agency clearly becomes demonic: “But to me this was a task of horror unspeakable. I felt myself as an added link to the chain, the end of which, held by an invisible hand, was drawing me to perdition” (270; see also 513, 537).


Compare: “A strange kind of presentiment frequently, on this day, occurred to her;—it seemed as if her fate rested here, and was by some invisible means connected with this castle” (Radcliffe, 250; my emphasis). Radcliffe’s figurization of Waipole’s literally intervening “invisible hand”—the exact reverse of the literalization of the figurative considered by Tzvetan Todorov as a typical device of the fantastic (The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975], 79)—can also be observed in Sophia Lee’s *The Recess*. “Every day furnisht us with every thing necessary for subsistence or improvement, as if it seemed by some invisible hand” (Sophia Lee, The Recess, or, A Tale of other Times, 3 vols. [London, 1783–85], 1:3; my emphasis). In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, only the cottagers believe for a short time that the monster’s helpful deeds are performed “by an invisible hand” (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or The Modern Prometheus* [1818], ed. Maurice Hindle [London: Penguin Books, 1962], 110, 111).

19 Radcliffe, 672.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macie (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 184–85. Hereafter abbreviated TMS and cited parenthetically in the text by page number. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* the “invisible hand” is less benign than usually assumed, since its context is Smith’s insistence that the beauty of commodities gives them an “appearance of utility” which does not really exist: “And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which reuses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (TMS, 183; my emphasis). This “deception” of the individual who is thus led to promote society’s welfare prefigures Hegel’s *List der Vernunft* [cunning of reason] which employs the passions of the “world-historical individual” to advance the development of reason in history: “It is not the universal idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background [im Hintergrund], untouched and uninjured, and sends the particular of passion into the combat to consume itself. This can be called the cunning of reason [die List der Vernunft]—that it sets the passions to work for itself, while that by which it posts its existence pays the penalty and suffers loss.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Die philosophische Weltgeschichte” (1830), in *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), 105. The translation, and all others in this essay, are my own. For a detailed comparison of Smith’s invisible hand and Hegel’s cunning of reason see John B. Davis, “Smith’s Invisible Hand and Hegel’s Cunning of Reason,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 16 (1989): 50–66.
Compare: "The quantity of every commodity which human industry can either purchase or produce, naturally regulates itself" (WN, 1:496).

24 Given Smith's unwillingness to address moral questions, which he probably considers as solved by his Theory of Moral Sentiments, Vivienne Brown is right in terming The Wealth of Nations an "amoral discourse" (Adam Smith's Discourse: Canoniziy, Commerce, and Conscience [New York: Routledge, 1994], 96).

25 Without linking the "invisible hand" to the gothic novel, a limited number of critics arrive in their meticulous readings at similar conclusions: Jacob Viner stresses the importance of "teleological elements" in "Adam Smith's system of thought" (The Role of Providence in the Social Order: An Essay in Intellectual History [Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972], 92); William Baumol highlights the "religious roots" of the "invisible hand" ("A Glimpse of the Invisible Hand," in Economics, Culture and Education, ed. Graham K. Shaw [Aldershot: Elgar, 1991], 34); and John B. Davis terms it "a Deus ex machina" and speaks of a "recourse to an extra-human, extra-social device" ("Smith's Invisible Hand and Hegel's Cunning of Reason," 64, 65).

26 Ebler, 18.


29 Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, 145 ("Newtonian . . . every phenomenon"), 26 ("sparingly . . . forms of speaking"; my emphasis). Given the impossibility of an economic, purely conceptual representation of the market's self-regulating capacity in The Wealth of Nations, the figure of "an invisible hand" is precisely one of those cases where the inopia of language renders a figurative expression more "proper" than "the common forms of speaking."

30 Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, 26.

31 Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, 6 ("perspicuity"), 8 ("What are generally": my emphasis).

32 Smith's critique of Frances Hutcson's foundation of ethical principles in human "benevolence" functions in a way that is comparable to his rejection of mercantilist theories. The dismissed benevolence of human actors—"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we can expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" (WN, 1:18)—is transferred to the impersonal mechanism of the market itself so that the benevolence of the "invisible hand" replaces human benevolence.

33 Parson, 179; see also, 176.

34 The end of Walpole's Otranto with Theodore's marriage to Isabella as replacement for the murdered Matilda prefigures the ending of Lewis's The Monk, where Lorenzo marries Virginia instead of Antonia, who is killed by her brother Ambrosio. The replaceability of the individual in these " providential" endings prefigures the later Darwinian form of providence where the species, not the individual, is important. For a


Poovey, *308* ("contradictions . . . conditions"), *323* ("through her depiction").

Poovey, *317* ("uncover, unmask"), *323* (*unmask*), *308* (*contradictions*).


"This chaos of contingencies [dieses Wimmeln von Willkür] generates on its own universal determinations, and the dispersed which seems to be void of reason is held by a necessity which arises by itself. Discovering this necessity is the object of political economy, a science which honors the idea, as it discovers the laws to a conglomerate of contingencies [Masse von Zufälligkeiten]." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1821), ed. K. Lowith and M. Fiedel (Frankfurt am Main: Fisher, 1965), 198.

Carl Grosse, *Der Genius: Aus den Papieren des Marquis C* *von C* *sta* (1791–1795), ed. H. Witte (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1982), 7 (my emphasis, Grosse's emphasis deleted).


The "invisible hand" is not quoted in: David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817); Jérôme Adolphe Blanqui, *History of Political Economy in Europe* (1837); John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (1848); Karl Marx,

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Das Kapitol; Karl Marx, Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie; John Ray McCulloch, Principles of Political Economy (1842, London: 1886), and other texts. John Ray McCulloch’s paraphrase, substituting “necessarily” for “led by an invisible hand,” is typical: “He [Smith] has shown that it is in every case sound policy, to leave individuals to pursue their own interest in their own way; that, in prosecuting branches advantageous to themselves, they necessarily prosecute such as are, at the same time, advantageous to the public” (36; my emphasis).


48 Accordingly, August Oncken, who quotes the “invisible hand” explicitly in his Adam Smith in der Culturgegeschichte (Vienna, 1874), does so in order to criticize Smith’s “doctrine of the harmony of interests” by comparing it to Leibniz’s “spiritualist postulate” of “prestabilized harmony” (19).

49 René Guenard, Histoire des Doctrines Economiques (1921, Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1924), 206; Erich Roll, A History of Economic Thought (London: Faber, 1938), 148. I can only offer speculations as to why the “invisible hand” suddenly emerges as a shorthand for Adam Smith around the turn of the century. However, as the celebratory endorsement of the trope emphasizes its benign aspects, it may serve as a reassurance against a renewed threatening opacity of the economic process. Conjuring the guidance of the benevolent “invisible hand” would then be the functional opposite to the employment of similar tropes in representations of corporations as demonic invisible agents—see, for instance, Otto von Gierke’s Die Genossenschaftstheorie und die deutsche Rechtssprache (Berlin, 1887) which conceives of the corporation as an “invisible person” [unsichtbares Verbandsperson] with its own will and agency, or the interrelation of Gierke’s Genossenschaftstheorie and Guy de Maupassant’s Le Hind (1887) see Stefan Andriopoulos, “Besessene Körper: ‘Crinoline Suggestion’ and ‘Körperschaftsverbrechen’ in Literatur, Medizin und Rechtswissenschaft des späten 19. Jahrhunderts,” Scientia Poetica 2 (1998): 129–50.

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