

Treating the Body Politic: Keynes's Postwar Rhetoric of Corporeality

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In this excerpt from my second paper for ENG 208: Reading the Essay with Professor Jeff Nunokawa, the reader can quickly see that, in terms of motive, I perhaps bit off more than I could chew.

Arguably, my larger motive holds up—that within “The Economic Consequences of the Peace,” Keynes is departing from serious economic analysis for rhetorical purposes, using literary metaphors of embodiment that we should attempt to analyze using traditional methods of close-reading.

However, I then overcomplicated this sufficiently interesting, interdisciplinary approach with another layer of motive: the scholarly motive of disagreeing with my professor, Jeff Nunokawa, who had read Keynes’s metaphor of embodiment in lecture as a purely a sexual one.

While I stand by my original claim that the consequences of Nunokawa’s misreading have a provocative gravity worth reconsidering in the service of medical rather than sexual imagery, this claim was poorly timed in the excerpt above, making for an overly lengthy, somewhat muddled introduction.

Months later, looking at this paper with fresh eyes tells me that many elements of my Keynes close-reading could indeed remain in the paper if restructured correctly. My disagreement with Nunokawa could generate a meaningful concession later on in body of the paper (pun intended) after I felt I had sufficiently answered some of my initial motivating questions (“But what are Keynes’s motivations behind using this political vocabulary of corporeality? Upon further close reading, what does it do to complement his typical mode of written expression?”) through the kinds of close-reading featured at the end of the excerpt.

The lessons here then are clear: first, just like a good thesis, motive too can (and should!) be allowed to evolve over the course of a well-structured paper. Second, especially in shorter papers, I would say it is inadvisable to frontload your paper with more material than can be artfully handled in a single introduction—it isn’t fair to your reader or yourself.

Excerpt

In his 1919 book “The Economic Consequences of the Peace,” economist John Maynard Keynes sought to persuade European leaders that excessive Allied reparations following the First World War would not only lead to the collapse of Germany’s economy but also to that of Europe as a whole—a prophetic warning which few statesmen heeded at the time.

In the essay “Paris,” he warns “the spokesmen of the French and British people” that the Peace “run[s] the risk of completing the ruin, which Germany began,” thus “impair[ing] yet further (...) the delicate, complicated organization, already shaken and broken by war, through which alone the European peoples can employ themselves.” On one level, Keynes is arguing here that, during the Treaty of Versailles, a kind of surgical precision was required from leaders like Lloyd George in order to restore Europe’s “complicated organization” and unity—a precision much unlike the harsh and unrealistic reparations which England actually proposed. But on another level, Keynes is also writing in a format far more accessible than his usual—serious economic analysis—using relatable devices to convey his points and

rhetoric to the layman or political outsider—most prominently, the political metaphor of embodiment, the body politic. “Europe is apart,” he says, “and England is not of her flesh and body.”

Keynes’s description of Europe as a corporeal entity should not be read as coincidental. Throughout the entire essay, he consistently anthropomorphizes the postwar state of European affairs, crossing an inchoate body politic to persuade us that there is economic stability in this body being “solid with itself”—or, as Keynes also phrases it, when all of Europe’s constituent nations “throb together, and their structure and civilization are essentially one.” But what are Keynes’ motivations behind using this political vocabulary of corporeality? Upon further close reading, what does it do to complement his typical mode of written expression?

Princeton professor Jeff Nunokawa argues that it serves to sexualize Europe or “libidinalize its economic sphere,” suggesting that the economic activity will always be motivated unconsciously by “animal spirits” that are, thus, in some way inextricable from the erotic. However, though Nunokawa is right to probe the importance of organic imagery in Keynes’s essays, I ultimately take issue with how his argument ignores certain clinical dimensions of the economist’s diction that, beyond establishing a corporeal metaphor, are selective about for whom this metaphor applies. Whereas Nunokawa sees every state in Keynes’s writing as a body politic (and a sexual one at that), a closer reading suggests that only those states belonging to continental Europe are bodies at all—England has intentionally been excluded. Furthermore, rather than a voyeur, Keynes in his essays instead casts himself as a sort of medical practitioner who, I will argue, seeks to treat Germany as a limb of Europe’s sick body wracked by unfair reparations, contrasting this body against the aloof, inhumanly “unconscious” England in order to shift postwar political action and opinion toward sympathy for the former.

[...] The economist writes “that Europe is solid with herself. France, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Holland, Russia and Roumania and Poland, throb together,” and even the rollicking sentence structure here ebbs and flows, embodying the palpitations these states together experience. Meanwhile, England, apart and sleeping, is not involved in this at all: in neither “Europe’s voiceless tremors” nor her “fearful convulsions of a dying civilization.” Thus, to throb as continental Europe does is not akin to participation in a sexual body politic, but an ill one: rather than shivers of pleasure to be tamed, these convulsions are death throes. Now enter Keynes, who seeks to address these matters “of life and death, of starvation and existence” much like a doctor does.

[...] Ideally, Keynes believes a fair compromise would leave “Germany and Austria-Hungary now prostrate” to critical care and treatment from policymakers—much “Like a patient etherized upon a table,” as T.S. Eliot (another, more-fringe member of the Bloomsbury group) once wrote in “The Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock.”

To Keynes’s distaste, however, the Treaty of Paris turned out to be “a nightmare” — “every one there was morbid,” he tells us. Etymologically, the root of “morbid” is the Latin *morbus*, meaning “sickness, disease, ailment, illness,” from the verb *mori* “to die.” Even in passing, Keynes’s language is painfully aware that, in reality, all economic decisions have bodily consequences, sometimes even deadly ones. Dealing with the flesh is ultimately unavoidable, so to assume pure rationality in issuing postwar

reparations is like wearing “a tragic-comic mask” instead of a surgical one—a theatrical waste of time, ignoring the reality of Europe’s situation.

Bios

Nicolette D’Angelo ’19 is happy to join the *Tortoise* staff this year, supplementing her other editorial experiences on-campus as Managing Editor of *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Fellow in the Writing Center, staff writer for *Stripe* magazine and Head Symposiarch for the first year mentorship program in the Council of the Humanities. When she isn’t reading other students’ work, she enjoys writing poetry, singing in the University Chapel Choir, eating (too many) cookies in Murray Dodge Café, and visiting her family in West Milford, NJ. She will most likely concentrate in English (Theory & Criticism) with certificates in Gender & Sexuality Studies, Humanistic Studies, and Creative Writing. She wrote this as a sophomore.