

**The Body Problematic: Political Imagination in Kant and Foucault.** By LAURA HENGHELD. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

Kyoo Lee

All knowledge, as Romanticism is aware, contains a secret irony or incipient contradiction: it must at once master its object and confront it as other, acknowledge in it an autonomy it simultaneously subverts. (Eagleton 1990, 74)

Ironically, the heterotopic imagination is the norm . . . [W]hat is “normal” in a statistical sense may also be profoundly *pathological* for certain bodies. Political imagination should create conditions under which each citizen, movement, or nation can experiment with and sets its own norms, without damaging similar prospects for others. (Hengehold 2007, 24–25)

Bodies, too, imagine?—well, yes, more than we could possibly know!

Such is the new old news, a trustful irony, that this book relays—with such a theoretical passion that this reviewer, who used editorial patience as a condition for the possibility of procrastination, is still thinking about it. *The Body Problematic* is a work of exquisite intensity and, dare I say, beauty.

What could be shown here in turn is a fraction of what must be said. Also given the extremely helpful, recent, concise review by Diana Taylor (2009), I shall simply focus on further framing Hengehold’s reflections *à la Foucault* on this particular and particularly post-Kantian aporia that Kant himself did not explicate but has rather left exposed: “a fact beyond doubt” at the core of all that waxy, material mysteriousness of the world, such as that “I am a body in the minimal sense” (Svare 2006, 240):

I am no more necessitated to draw inferences in respect of the reality of external objects than I am in regard to the reality of the objects of my inner sense (my thoughts), for in both cases they are nothing but representations, the immediate perception (consciousness) of which is at the same time a sufficient proof of their reality. (Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A 371, cited in Svare 2006, 240)

This capital, frontal *problema*, this “sufficient” bodily evidence in and of reality, “in front of you” (Derrida and Dutoit 1995, 10) and me, Hengehold explores as a problem of “a proto-body or the body as problematic object” (Hengehold 2007, 90).

"The proto-body" is then still a body, at least *something*, something *active*, between bodies, actually or potentially. Irreducible to a Cartesian extension or any phenomenological variants or technological devices, it is something that acts or exercises as or like the Kantian transcendental schema, giving rise to the very "line" of difference between "in(side)" and "out(side)," detectable at every point in space and time. And yet, it does seem "missing in action" (89–115) in the sense that:

We cannot know, according to Kant, what bodies are in themselves, or to whatever "thing-in-itself" our bodies may give access. The appearances and abilities of bodies are mere *forms* for exercises of sensibility and understanding, in conjunction with imaginative reason. But they are *material* forms, that is, forms whose possibilities for variation are limited in space and time, by the very capacities that enable them to move, reflect, and change, including change in perspective. (113–14)

For Kant, bodily sensibilities and imaginations that appear or are shaped, which are instantiations of the "material formality" of the proto-body, are not "things in themselves," "X," kept off-limits or locked-in as such; this way, the minimal body at every turn, as noted above, thwarts rationalist or idealist moves. Rather, more dynamically, they form or materialize in the form of a sort of invisible agent or generative force—of progressive gluing, scanning, sliding off, and so on. This minimal body in potential (in)action (dis)connects—circulates through and "transcendentally unifies," as the Kant idiom goes—our inner and outer senses, of which animate bodies and embodied consciousness are self-referential proofs, as noted above. So, we get to "find it," this proto-body, "on the side of both the transcendental and the empirical, *obliquely* referenced in the doctrine of the faculties . . . and *overtly* referenced as an object of the physical and anthropological domains" (115, emphases added).

Now then, why that proto-body—in and after Kantian aesthetics? That is the question, as I see it, at the heart of the matter in this text, *The Body Problematic*: how to do justice to, to "reference," both the "oblique" body and the "overt" body at once, materially and formally marked or otherwise mark-able as such: how to render the Kantian body of normalized<sup>1</sup> boundaries and normative<sup>2</sup> expectations not only visible but visible *anew*, as precisely and potently as possible, at that point of tactile obscurity, that is the theoretical, somewhat technical, post-Kantian–Foucaultian challenge Hengehold posed to herself, to which she has responded with remarkable erudition and vision.

"The body problematic," rediscovered as the aesthetic "void" (2, 7, 9) within the canonical Kantian problematic of limit consciousness, that is,

the “transcendental idealism/empirical realism” doublet, is thereby still in the sphere of the Kantian imagination. It is imagined in everyday contacts, moments, and situations, including the “avoidance” (3, 15) of them thereof, which involves (im)practical judgments and (in)decisions often densely and intricately layered with manifold affects and perceptions; suffice to think here, for example, of the asylum, prison, school, hospital, office, house, apartment block, bedroom, closet, drawer, and so on, all kinds of boxed and gated spaces including more psychosomatically oriented and organized spaces such as what is often called “personal space,” zones of and between human individuals and individuation secured and separated as such.

The case in point that has literally prompted Hengehold’s theoretical narrative is the fatal *con-front*-ation between “Eleanor Bumpurs, a ‘270-pound, arthritic sixty-seven-year-old woman,’” “African-American,” and the NYPD that “shot and killed her in 1984 for resisting eviction from city housing with a knife” (1); today in 2009, we sense a guy-next-door possibility, involving, this time around, (un)surprisingly, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “male, black, 58,”<sup>3</sup> and James Crowley, an officer from the Cambridge Police Department, an incident that is, if not equally tragic, “b(lo)ody-problematic” none the less. “Mrs. Bumpurs would not have died if not for the way a broad range of personal and institutional *expectations construed her body and her freedom*” (1, emphasis added) as summarily dangerous and life-threatening; likewise, Prof. Gates would not have been arrested if . . . (the debate goes on, to determine, for instance, to what extent the set of ill-founded expectations was mutual).

The point I am problematizing, with Hengehold, concerns quite simply the failure of the imagination, specifically the political kind, and the maddening repetition of reciprocal reinforcement of it on both micropolitical and global political levels. Indeed one would have to wonder whether and how we could “avoid *inventing* people and situations like Mrs. Bumpurs’s” (3) and Gates’s in the first place, or else whether and why they should be invented otherwise; the imagined world aside, is it *imaginable* for us to live in a space rather attentive to Mrs. Bumpurs’s rather poetic delirium, “seeing Reagan coming through her walls,” or a place no longer in need of the “hysteria” of a Harvard critic as a measure of (in)sanity? With Foucault and Hengehold, who both trace the biopolitical forces of normative or normalizing discourses that, via such intuitive “construal” of *communis sensus*, at once enable and constrain subjective freedom, we see that Kant, the arbiter of the North-and-trans-Atlantic Enlightenment, remains not only responsible but resourceful; life today, imagined or *imaginable*, could draw its vision from the inaugural blindness and insight of *The Critique of Judgment*.

*The Body Problematic* as a whole, loosely partitioned into three parts, respectively, on Kant (the Political Topology or Void of Kantian Reason),



Foucault (Kantian Man and His Double; or Body Subject to or Shaped by Power Relations), and Hengehold (Neoliberal Global Market Economy and The Role of Sovereignty), is an attempt to point a way out of such a cloistered, inscriptive tyranny of bodily expectations and imperatives—by pointing to the alternatively Kantian body of distinct affects and heterotopic freedom that appears to be, yes, “missing in action” but, again as we can see, is still present in the form of imaginary possibilities. With Foucault, who toward the end of his philosophical project returns to the proto-Kantian aesthetics of the sublime where manifold aesthetic possibilities are formally and curiously preserved, which the book evaluates in a positive light, Hengehold, too intensely (parts I–II) and independently (part III), seeks to rework the Kantian present, a legacy of critical philosophy—perpetual Kant effects, as it were—by setting out to analyze “power” yet again, “Foucault’s name for the way bodily materiality is organized and disposed” (181) such as “resonances and aversions that Kant calls pure or nonempirical feelings” (211).

Drawing insights creatively from Foucault’s post-Kantian turn to aesthetic paradigm, a shift from ethics, that is, as widely recognized by Foucault scholars, *The Body Problematic* offers, for instance in the section on “Migration of Sovereignty” (part III, 224–47), a compellingly topical analysis of “how bodies feel or assume the stress of governmental technologies such as *raison d’état* or liberalism” (224) as exemplified by security or risk-detection technology. Particularly instructive here, I find, is Hengehold’s interweaving of a Foucaultian Kant and a Kantian Foucault, for example, the Foucaultian line of reading the sovereign “*dispositif* of knowledge/power” (that converts something nonexistent into something real) on the one hand, and Kant’s “Copernican shift” to the finitude of the human realm of appearances and understanding on the other hand. Foucault and Kant, closely and dynamically combined this way by Hengehold, richly illuminate the internal “migratory” logic of state sovereign power, a shift from “its juridical activities to its risk-prevention activities” (236).

As amply demonstrated throughout this book, the philosophical pressure of that particular question on the enduring, political legacy of the Kantian present and sublime, a vitally historical element of the bigger question of sensate life itself, is palpable especially today, when the fantastical and often fanatical global order of smooth phenomenality constantly, insidiously, partnered with the various engines and enigmas of post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism, disguises the bloody realities of worldwide political struggles. Indeed, a neoliberal political order seems to have appeared. So, read this book, which does presuppose some background knowledge of Kant and Foucault, but in any case and regardless of your political leanings or affiliations, you will feel at least slightly different, if not better, about this world that perhaps does not have to be or may not continue to be this way.

## NOTES

1. "An external standard for a given organism" (251).
2. "A unique qualitative state in each organism that cannot be measured in advance because it relates that organism to unforeseen events" (251).
3. Incident Report #9005127, Report Entered: 07/16/2009, 13:21:34, Cambridge Police Department.

## REFERENCES

- Derrida, Jacques, and Thomas Dutoit. 1995. *On the name*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1990. *The ideology of the aesthetic*. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell.
- Svare, Helge. 2006. Body and practice in Kant. In *Studies in German Idealism*, ed. R. W. Munk, Vol. 6. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 213–244.
- Taylor, Diana. 2009. *Self-transformations: Foucault, ethics, and normalized bodies* by Cressida J. Heyes; *The body problematic: Political imagination in Kant and Foucault* by Laura Hengehold. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 34 (2): 459–60.

## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION



**Title:** [The Body Problematic]

**Source:** Hypatia 25 no2 Spr 2010 p. 480-4

**ISSN:** 0887-5367

**Publisher:** Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, United Kingdom

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.