Chapter 7

Classical and Grotesque Polities

As shown, nascent states had serious concerns about geographical boundaries' becoming and remaining integral under the auspices of political claimants. The fact that political unity remained an ideal is unquestionable. However, as suggested, diverse factors, such as political factions and violence, contributed to the instability of European politics, which troubled early modern imaginations and therefore inspired reversals of the classical body politic, tamed and sealed at the borders. Chapter 3 demonstrated how Machiavelli made more of composite bodies than integral ones. His image of a headless, content body politic shatters the humanist polity. The head separated from the body has the capacity to wreck havoc in the state and to destroy life. The preceding image is markedly Medusan: it matches the potential of Cellini’s Gorgon to threaten enemies of the Medici. Machiavelli’s statement also undermines the idea of the holistic state by implying that the head may turn against itself, just as Cellini’s penchant for violence turned against him. Indeed, this chapter will detail how the Perseus and Medusa responds to and disrupts the humanist model of the state.

The preceding political situation mirrored a broad cultural dilemma. In Najemy’s words:

Despite its reputation for having discovered (or rediscovered) the canonical image of a body whose order, proportions, and harmony reproduced those of the entire universe and could thus serve as a model, measure, or rule for the right ordering of political communities, the Renaissance actually entertained a bewildering variety of images of the body natural. It is perhaps not so surprising that the humanists responded to this pervasive ignorance and uncertainty about the body with ennobling myths about the body’s perfect proportions and enduring dignity. Uncertainty about the body was in all likelihood just as productive of anxiety in the Renaissance as it is for us, and the myth of the body’s harmony, order, and dignity (and of the actual or desired reflection of the same in worlds out-

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side the body) was summoned to deflect the uncomfortable awareness of just how little was in fact known about the body.²

Let me turn to Machiavelli’s example once again:

Bodies human and bodies politic, for Machiavelli, are always involved in processes that subvert efforts at closure, demarcation, and what Bakhtin called the “border of a closed individuality.”³

In short, the age of state formation witnessed a growing awareness of the body’s physical boundaries. Early modern individuals knew that the “mixed body of humankind” must “face dangers from within and without, and it is particularly vulnerable at the boundaries.”⁴ The Renaissance obsession with the humoral body fed into this preoccupation. For instance, Ficino stated that the body is “perpetually in flux, changed by growing, shrinking, continuous disintegration, liquefaction, and alternative heat and cold.”⁵ The preceding statement indicates that the marriage of matter and form was especially unstable: matter could fluctuate at any given time and thus take on a different form – an all too frequent occurrence in an age beset by a multitude of diseases.

I must turn to Mikhail Bakhtin’s image of the anti-classical body, that is, the grotesque body, which pervaded the Renaissance imagination. Aspects of the grotesque were ubiquitous in the mythology, art and folklore of the ancient Mediterranean, but during the classical age the grotesque was relegated to ‘low; that is, nonclassical forms, such as comic masks, symbols of fertility, satyrs, satiric drama, Attic comedy, and the like. The grotesque was not, however, systematically analyzed, defined, or categorized; neither was it given a name. One discovery helped to bring the grotesque into Renaissance consciousness. Late fifteenth-century Italians unearthed the first-century baths of the Roman Emperor Titus, which contained ornaments with fanciful plant, animal, and human features. The decorations became known as grottesche (from the Italian ‘grotto’).⁶ In Bakhtin’s terms, the decorations of Titus seemingly merged and thus gave birth to one another:

² Najemy, 260.
³ Najemy, 259.
⁴ Najemy, 248.