

Fragments, spolia and economic texts

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Abstract

This chapter will attempt to form a connection across three disparate fields. First, it will argue that Schlegel had a consistent and modern view on the importance of the fragment in understanding contemporary reality. This view defines the romantic perspective and imbues the objects or text it glorifies with a meaning that is suggestive rather than definite. From these tentative remarks, the argument will move to the Arch of Constantine, built during (or before?) the 4th century AD, and will discuss both the use of spolia as fragments that display their association with their past, and as promises that these will become a basis for some new symbolism pregnant of an imagined future. From this application of Schlegel's remarks on the history of viewing the arch, we will move to Keynes' *General Theory*, in order to see how a text, like an architectural object, can display references as spolia of a past and of a future at the same time. Through its explicitly disjointed message, the GT steeps the reader in the context that these references bring with them, and the reader takes as given in order to construct an understanding of the text. This process, by refocusing the attention from the fragmentary text and its incomplete meaning back to the reader and the interpretive tools they bring with them or/and "discover" in an implied form in the text, allows the reader to imagine new spaces of meaning and build potential future understandings.

Introduction¹

One of the important questions that has been at the centre of economic thinking at least since the work of Adam Smith is the development of systems of analysis that are able to give a rational, coherent and definitive picture of the social and economic world. The importance of this enlightenment programmatic vision in the development of the discipline of economics cannot be understated – it is behind the formation of the classical, neoclassical and Marxist conceptions of the economy that are the basis of most of the theoretical output in economics that spans the last 200 years. In these traditions, the link between economic theorists and idealist philosophers has been explored extensively in the literature. There is a substantial corpus of work that shows the influence of enlightenment philosophers on the physiocrats, or Hegel's influence and importance on Marx's thought to name two obvious examples.

Nevertheless, this broad philosophical tradition of system builders who organise and make explicit the links that hold together the fabric of reality in a structurally coherent and defined, in its totality, system of analysis is one way to theorise and attempt to come up with a refined understanding of social reality. In contradistinction to this approach, the romantic writers and theorists point to another way – a way that focuses on capturing the complexity of society through the impression of its different facets by using tools that are more open ended in their approach and suggestive rather than definitive in their findings. As Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert notes, this should not be seen as a primitive and unsuccessful effort to build a system, but as a radically different way to do analysis and provide insight. She writes:

One important reason why the early German Romantics have gone unnoticed by most philosophers is that their work is read as part of the tradition of classical German Idealism, and in the company of grand system builders such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, their work which was not designed to result in grand theories at all, is often dismissed as incomplete and unimportant, as nothing more than a collection of dilettantish efforts ... to deal with philosophical problems that were much more 'professionally' addressed by their contemporaries, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

(Millan-Zaibert 2007: 44).

Instead, however, of trying to assign to the Romantics practices, modes of expression and ends that are not their own, it is important to attempt to explore their own programmatic vision and armoury of tools. They focus on a complex layering of meaning that allows many interpretations of a literary passage, without settling necessarily on only one, through mediums of expression that include the use of irony and even incompleteness in the form of the fragment. In this sense, we can argue that:

The themes of incompleteness and incomprehension we find in their work are reflected in the literary forms they used to present it; the use of the fragment, for example, was not a result of a lack of resolution, a blameworthy incompleteness, in the sense of something that was meant to be finished and never was. Early German Romantic philosophy is incomplete not because the Romantics failed to finish their work but rather because they were convinced that a complete system could not be built.

(Millan-Zaibert 2007: 46).

This lack of commitment to a system view should not be seen as an inability to theorise, but rather as an effort to not be tied to one way of seeing things. Schlegel admits “It is equally fatal for the spirit to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two” (Millan-Zaibert 2007: 47). The fragment allows at one end an openness that could lead to new understandings, and at the other touches the negation of all knowledge, a nihilism that nothing can be truly known. But against this nihilism what we have is the plurality of possible understandings. The abandonment of a monolithic view of the nature of human society is not equivalent to the abandonment of all knowledge. In fact, properly operationalised, it allows the development of a plurality of perspectives that would address different aspects of social reality and offer innovative solutions to problems old and new.

Therefore, what this chapter will explore is how we can bring together these different visions in a new and coherent space and at the same time explore the poetics of this new kind of theorising and also the new kind of “organised thinking” this open-ended approach can give rise to. For this end, I will attempt to make a connection across three disparate literatures, which are literary and architectural theory and economic texts. The chapter has the following structure: The next section argues that Schlegel had a consistent and modern view on the importance of the fragment in understanding contemporary reality. This view of the fragment as a stand-alone element of reality defines the

romantic perspective and imbues the objects or text it glorifies with a meaning that is suggestive rather than definite. The section *from fragments to spolia* will link the concept of the romantic fragment to that of the *spolium*, as used in architectural theory and practice, and see how physical objects such as buildings can come together by an assemblage of pre-existing fragments. The next section will present a tangible form of this concept of *spolium*-assemblage, the Arch of Constantine, built during (or before?) the 4th century AD, and will discuss both the use of *spolia* as fragments that display their association with their past, and as promises that these will become a basis for some new symbolism pregnant with an imagined future. We then consider how the example of the arch and its use of *spolia* to convey a complex and layered message to a disparate audience can be used as a way to approach theoretical texts in economics and especially Keynes' *General Theory (GT)*. The argument is that a text, like an architectural object, rests on *spolia* of meaning that connects it with its intended audience. By not hiding the nature of its message and its disjointed or open-ended threads of argument and reflection, the GT steeps the reader in the context that they bring with them, and they take as given, in order to construct an understanding of the text which is both deeply personal and through shared context, universal as each reader discovers their own meanings and associations. This process refocuses the attention from the fragmentary text and its incomplete message back to the reader and the interpretive tools they bring with them and develop in order to decode the text. It allows the reader to imagine new spaces of meaning and build radically new future understandings.

Schlegel on fragments: Completeness was a mirage of the past

The idea that the fragment is not an object that needs to be completed in a particular way to take a tangible and definite (and therefore understandable) form is historically linked with the Romantic Movement.² In a way, the romantic reconceptualisation of the fragment moves us beyond the dichotomy of either something being complete, understandable and rational, and as such within the realm of comprehension and knowledge, or being incomplete, disjointed and irrational, holding little meaning other than a glimpse of loss, chaos and incomprehension. This dichotomy implicit in the enlightenment viewpoint with its pursuit of certain truths, is either abolished or reinterpreted in new ways. It reorients our pursuit of knowledge from that of an objective and complete picture to the possible different expressions that a fragment can take and the further ideas, concepts or understandings it can give rise to.

In this transformation, Schlegel's work adds an interesting perspective. Schlegel theorised that modernity is defined of fragments. The ancient past left behind only its fragments – and therefore we look at the past only through the fragments that have survived, and we need to imagine what the whole was like. A whole that is constantly reshaped as our imagination forms new understandings and takes in new perspectives. If we admit this central aspect of the past, as a world lost, at the beginning of a linear conception of time that moves forward (rather than seeing reality in cyclical time, when history, human society, even artistic effort repeats itself, much as the seasons do), then we can adapt the definition of fragments in the following interesting way. If we start building something today, it is only a fragment of a future yet to be realised, and a future that is to some degree unknown. This is true not only when we are constructing a tangible object (e.g., a building) but also when we are developing a theoretical corpus, whose complete argument and the ramifications of the argument and the ideas it will give rise to are yet to be determined.

Therefore, fragments as an approach to reality become the basic hermeneutic tool of our epoch – they define our viewpoint of the past and of the future. The present is seen both through the traces the past has left behind, and as the start of new beginnings, whose shape is yet to be determined. As Schlegel writes “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written” (*Athenaeum* Fragment n. 24 in Schlegel 2002b: 246).³

The importance of this realisation is that the attempt to have a complete objective meaning of an artefact or a text (a poem, a piece of literature – even a theoretical work) remains outside the realm of the possible and, at its core, is not a valid pursuit. Even when we think that this has been achieved, it is clearly the outcome of defining the scope of our

viewpoint upon reality narrowly enough to see a fragment as a complete understanding. As Tanehisa notes “Schlegel posits, works that appear to possess unity at a glance in fact do so only superficially and, in the negative sense, fail to be more than a mere fragment” (Tanehisa 2009: 60). Interestingly, in 1797, Schlegel writes his essay *On Lessing*, the following

The most interesting and the most penetrating in Lessing’s works is intimation and suggestion [Winke und Andeutungen]; that which is the ripest and the most complete in his works are fragments of fragments...His accurate reasoning is generally little more than a string of witty ideas.

(Tanehisa 2009: 61).⁴

Thus, the fragment is complete simply because it functions as a vehicle for new ideas, for the space it gives to the reader/viewer/interpreter to imbue it with meaning and develop new avenues of thought. In short, it captures the dynamism of our epoch, its march towards a future whose contours are constantly re-drawn and re-imagined, at every point in time. This brings forth a new type of object or text, one that does not purport to be complete or unidimensional in what it attempts to convey but acts more as a support in the journey an individual takes as they construct meaning of the natural and social world around them.

From Fragments to Spolia: Re-possession as a way to shock and involve the reader/viewer in narrative creation

The romantic fragment, as conceived, is a concept that tries to allow the opening up of space through its dissociation from its surrounding text and its attached context.⁵ Schlegel writes “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine” (*Athenaeum* Fragments, no. 206 in Schlegel 2002b: 251). And yet, while, in theory, this allows the maximum freedom for the reader to build their own understanding and unleash their imagination, this is exactly what a fragment can never do. By broadcasting its incompleteness, the knowledge that it is a broken part of a whole which we do not know the full contours of, it invites the reader/viewer to add from what they know and lean on associations they have from other texts or readings to complete its message. In an odd twist, the suspended empty space that Schlegel exults as enveloping a fragment is no-where to be found. Even though the fragment appears liberated on the page from elucidations that an author would feel obliged to do, it becomes embroidered in context the moment it meets the eye of the reader.

At a more basic level, every fragment is either by construction or through the act of interpretation by the reader a *spolium* – an attempt of appropriation and internalisation of the phrases of someone else, who either left it by intention incomplete (as the Romantic authors did) or became incomplete and reinterpreted in the act of reading.⁶ Thus, the Romantic poet imbues the fragment with many and at times contradictory meanings which come from external associations, from the surrounding world that they have torn it away from, but of which the fragment remains a vessel and a memory. These associations may be constructions of the individual reader, and yet, the power of the fragment to hold some distinctive element, and therefore a memory of a broader – rather than entirely personal – meaning, cannot be denied.

Here, architectural theory can give us not only a new viewpoint on exploring this aspect of a fragment’s message but also an armoury of definitions and concepts to deal with its many facets. Architectural historians and archaeologists have extensively worked on the concept of spolia.⁷ *Spolia* comes from the Latin “spoils of war”,⁸ and is an architectural term used for stones repossessed from one building or ruin and embedded into another. In its use in architectural theory, the focus is not on the non-descript repossessed stone but on the stone that displays the fact that it comes from another building or structure.⁹ In short, it displays, or does not hide, that it is a fragment of another whole, violently

removed.¹⁰ That whole may have become a ruin, or was a building that was taken down and dismembered with its material becoming structural and ornamental blocks for other projects.

The story of spolia is as long and varied as human history itself. It stretches to the very beginning of human building work. In times that pre-date the industrial revolution the repossession and re-use of blocks performed not only an aesthetic but fundamentally a practical function as disused or dilapidated buildings were used as quarries for new ones. The consistency of building techniques and material used across time made this exercise an obvious labour-saving activity when building something new, instead of quarrying for new stone or creating new building material, both of which usually entailed substantially more labour cost.¹¹

That this activity of re-purpose and re-use would be more prevalent in time of economic hardship or in periods of depopulation and decline when the cost of entirely new material to build or repair something would be seen as prohibitive is obvious but should not simply be assumed. It would tend to separate economic realities from other social processes happening at the time. In fact, in most cases, this re-use and re-possession appears not only to be fulfilling immediate practical needs, nor should it be interpreted as simply an indication of economic decline. *Spolia* carry with them part of their past, their own aesthetic and other signifiers and point into meaning and association that these repositions do not obliterate, and at times are meant to celebrate or use for new purposes. *Spolia* become part of the language of the new object by extending it, and an element of its identity and meaning. This meaning does not admit a single interpretation exactly because it is composed of allusions to many different buildings, ages, people and aesthetic and other languages. However, exactly because *spolia* could be used for many reasons and purposes, the concept can be used to denote very different activities and, has been used in this way among architectural historians working in this field. For the purposes of this chapter, we will concentrate on one specific and celebrated example, the *locus classicus* of *spolia* literature, the Arch of Constantine in Rome.¹² The point is to see how a celebrated building and one of the best-preserved ancient buildings in Rome stood the test of time, being itself a *spolium*, a great survivor whose message changed over time to fit the times. More generally, however, we will attempt through it to gain a broad understanding of the complex layering of meaning that *spolia* can imbue a building or architectural object with.

The Arch of Constantine: Spolia and the veil of seeing a complex object

There is arguably no other architectural object that has occupied the field of *spolia* studies more than the Arch of Constantine in Rome. The Arch of Constantine is a (probably) 4th century AD building dedicated during the early years of Constantine the Great's reign, on the ancient *Via triumphalis* of Rome very close to the Coliseum. It was part of the programme by the new emperor to beautify the city and establish his new authority over Maxentius, the discredited predecessor, and the tetrarchy system that Constantine inherited and effectively abolished.

Temporally, the arch stands at the end of the ancient world and its transition to the medieval period. Constantine was the first emperor to convert to Christianity and the emperor who moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople. The arch is one of the last triumphal arches built in Rome (and in this case, contrary to custom, built for a triumph over a Roman rival Maxentius, instead of an external enemy which was the ancient norm for building arches) and, also the first that uses so extensively parts of existing buildings both for its construction and its decoration. This extensive use of *spolia* is an emblematic feature of the arch which has attracted attention since its creation. Archaeological analysis has shown that Constantine's arch has repossessed spolia and other decorative elements from a number of monuments of previous eras, and especially from the building projects of the "good emperors" of the past, particularly, Hadrian, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius.¹³ This creates a complex visual language that according to some modern scholars associates Constantine with the exploits and successes of these emperors, and the stability and wealth that the Roman Empire had then. In this visual language, Constantine adds his own stamp both by re-curving his face on the decorative *spolia* of the previous eras (defacing the "good emperors" by altering their image to his own)¹⁴ and by inserting a frieze composed after 303 CE and using the artistic style of the period, instead of the classical style of the age of the "good emperors".¹⁵

All this high relief creates a complex and varied visual language that the viewer is confronted with. This has presented new challenges in the understanding of the arch and its multi-faceted message. Archaeologists as well as art historians have debated two interlinked questions: (1) What did the contemporary viewer make of the arch and its complex visual language and symbolism? (2) How have viewers since then viewed the arch, and decoded its meaning?

There is no agreed answer to either of these questions, but an indication of the answers could move us some way towards understanding the type of interpretative lines that this object has given rise to. On the first question, i.e. the message received by contemporary viewers, archaeologists and historians have argued different lines. La Rocca and

Zanker (2007) seem to suggest that the arch's message was aimed at an "uncultured" audience and its mismatch of styles and whatever subtle message that implied, was secondary to the overall overbearing impression of wealth and power all these sculptural elements created. They further note that contemporary viewers would be unaware of the complex allusions the arch implicitly builds. In this line of argument, Liverani notes that the monument was directed towards "*un pubblico assai più vasto e popolare*" (Liverani 2004: 401) and Curran writes that "it is even more difficult to believe that the two most important viewers of the monument, Constantine and the Roman populace, would have understood the significance of such a subtle composition" (Curran 2000: 87).

This line negates the complex language that *spolia* built as assemblage art. That is the visual outcome of the contrasting styles of the decorative elements drawn from different eras and using a mismatch of symbolic languages. The argument effectively sees even the decorative elements as building material in the crudest form – they add ornamental detail that lacks any deep association or meaning, other than "looking imposing" in the most obvious sense. The interpretative line that sees this composition of *spolia* as an assemblage of imposing carvings only is equivalent to saying that there was a complete break with the past (e.g., Rome lost a war, its citizens all killed and a foreign power taking over the city and its monuments) and a new ruler took what they liked and built a new arch for themselves – completely oblivious of any meaning other than its striking beauty.

The alternative line has been argued by Sande (2012) who notes that "The Arch of Constantine must have given different messages to different spectators according to their status and education" (Sande 2012: 287). Sande notes that the dismissal of the education of the viewer of this era is linked with the overall belief in "late antique art being somewhat inferior" (Sande 2012: 287). Thus, this interpretative line indicates that the multi-faceted arts of Constantine's era, which had moved away from the realistic representations of the classical period and into a new symbolic language in the representation of the body, the composition of the crowd and its appearance, are indications of decline, not only of art but also of artistic understanding.

In a way, this negates what we think Constantine and the senate tried to achieve with this arch – i.e., instead of seeing it as a symbol of the return to the "good times" of the reigns of the emperors whose *spolia* Constantine appropriates, *spolia* become the symbol of how far the Roman empire had declined. The decline is so serious that the only worthy art is *spolia* from the past, which share space with inferior contemporary art of late Diocletian's and Constantine's period. This way of seeing the Arch forms an important and even constitutive narrative of how we think of the history of western art since the renaissance.

It is not coincidental that one of the first recorded viewers of the arch after the Middle Ages is the painter, Raphael. Raphael writes a famous report for Pope Leo X in about 1519, where he notes the following:

Although literature, sculpture, painting, and almost all the other arts had long been declining and had grown worse and worse until the time of the last emperors, yet architecture was still studied and practiced according to the good rules and buildings were erected in the same style as before Of this there are many evidences: among others, the Arch of Constantine, which is well designed and well-built as far as architecture is concerned. But the sculptures of the same arch are very feeble and destitute of all art and good design. Those, however, that come from the spoils of Trajan and Antoninus Pius are extremely fine and done in perfect style.

(Translated in Elsner 2000: 149)

This interpretative line of seeing the arch remains a powerful one. A modern re-statement by Berenson (1954) is somewhat more refined in that it explicitly claims that his interest on the arch is to examine the decorative elements “and while doing so, we shall ignore history, whether spiritual or material, social or political” (Berenson 1954: 2). He builds a framework of interpreting art on how realistic representations are and argues that “they must allow me, however, to insist that in my point of view decline is decline and not simplification, symbolization, sublimation or any other –ation...” (Berenson 1954: 3). From this perspective, the use of *spolia* may be due to a “hurry to get things ready in time” but he adds there is

a feeling that nothing could be done then and there as worthy of the occasion. Explain it as you will, it was a confession of inferiority to the past, whether economic or artistic, as happened long before when Ramses II had statues of earlier Pharaohs rededicated to himself.

(Berenson 1954: 14).

It is easy to trivialise such assessments from a modern theory of art perspective. However, this viewpoint has some currency across lay viewers throughout history and until today, because of the transformation of western art that has been the bedrock of our visual language since the Renaissance. Significantly, one real problem of this perspective is

that it imposes a particular conformist line of viewing the object, suppressing what could be seen as its complex and multi-level message that could open a new understanding both of the times the object was created in and, by reflection, of our own.

Another way to interpret the object's complex visual symbolism is to wonder why it was built in this way. Our interest lies in the opposite direction to Berenson's, its artistic message is of importance to us exactly because it is situated in a particular historical and social context and not as an exercise to describe artistic forms from today's vantage point. From there, we can deduce not only that the arch appealed to different viewers who had necessarily a different level of education as Sande (2012) argues, but that at a more fundamental level, we see a fragmentation of the very artistic language that had defined the ancient Roman world since its early antiquity and association with classical Greece. The beginning of Christianity as a more established religion brought with it (and/or coincided with) deep changes in art, this kind of (what was in more ways than one) underground art brought with it a language that cannot be seen as a simplification of classical art in cheaper mantle, lacking details and refinement, but essentially part of the same visual universe. It is distinct enough to be viewed as new and here to cater to other needs and impulses.¹⁶ Thus, you have, for example, the highly dynamic and animated scene of the *spolia* in the central passage of the Arch, which depict Trajan's battle with the Dacians, in contrast with the stocky, static and substantially less subtle and more class conscious in a forward-looking medieval sense, soldiers of the later frieze.¹⁷ Constantine himself is depicted in different ways, as if he himself occupies different spheres of existence, power and even social and spiritual positions. For example, his head was recurved on the *spolia* of the good emperors in the antique manner – dispossessing them of their bodies and also of the visual language of the tableau and the classical grandeur that surrounds a Roman Emperor, the first citizen and soldier of the state. In contrast, on the later frieze, he hands alms (or gifts) to his people seated on a throne that resembles medieval kings without any of the subtle signals of the emperor being “the first of Roman citizens”.¹⁸ Even in military depictions, we can see significant differences between the compositions. For example, compare the highly animated battle scene of Trajan's tableau, where the emperor is in the thick of the battle, triumphant over the enemy combatants, heroically depicted but still as another combatant, with the new frieze with him seated on a chariot in procession at the back of the army entering Rome, with ranks mirroring the social strata of society.

All these mixed messages are there because this subtle composition may serve a complex purpose. This is alluding to the past and drawing from it authority, power and reassurance that the period of internal strife is over, and at the same

time hinting that things have changed. One possible interpretation is that the arch does not hide that it is heralding a new order, and this new order is here to stay and will bring with it stability and prosperity that can match the past. This complex message cannot easily be communicated through one visual language and one set of symbols. It needs the parallel languages that are part of the very fragmentation of the ancient world in this period in time to deliver its message. Its intention is also to appeal to different parts of the population through its complex symbolism. To the new Christian underclass, possibly the lower strata of population, the new emperor may, through the frieze, speak in a language they would be familiar with and recognise.¹⁹ The alms are to the many, the many can look to the one for their protection and guidance. The parallel to the Christian symbolism of one saviour/one king is an iconography that will define much of the Middle Ages and may be in its first steps here. The “new” symbolic art that adorns the catacombs, modest altars and funerary monuments of the first Christians has now a place in the most formal of buildings, the triumphal arch of the emperor.²⁰ And to the Roman educated elite, the monument speaks a different message – a message of a Roman Emperor who respects tradition, assimilates it, is a noble and will treat nobles by their rights. He is here to unite under him the people, plebeian and patrician against a common enemy, foreign invaders and their internal supporters. This reading of the monument means that the emperor and the senate knew very well what they were trying to do, heal the divide that was rupturing the ancient world and try to give different messages to different parts of society, all through one medium, the arch. The assemblage of spolia and new sculpture was not haphazard, it was the only way at that point in time and in that society to display this complex multi-layered message. In this way, we can also understand the arch’s somewhat peculiar inscription which reads:

To the emperor Flavius Constantine, the Great, pious and fortunate, the Senate and People of Rome, because by divine inspiration and his own great spirit with his army on both the tyrant and all his faction at once in rightful battle he avenged the State, dedicated this arch as a mark of triumph.

(Translated by Claridge 1998: 272)

The much-analysed phrase “by divine inspiration” (*INSTINCTV DIVINITATIS*) is nebulous enough to please all viewers – both pagan and Christian who would be looking for some clear allusion to the new faith, without offending either or explicitly taking sides.²¹ This text displays the very same characteristics that are observed in the pictorial

composition of the arch- tradition and innovation, stock phrases and expressions²² with new, open-ended meanings and messages. Maybe by managing to have different viewers see the message they were looking for and by making the arch speak to them, Constantine achieved his purpose of uniting a fragmented people. The inscription, like the whole arch itself and its complex pictural imagery, “reveals a deliberate ambiguity designed to achieve reconciliation and tolerance” (Pierce 1989: 407).

From this standpoint, a re-appreciation of the arch can convey to the modern viewer similar messages of permanence and transience, multiple meanings without necessarily security in finding a final key that will unlock all questions relating to the monument. The interplay of different visual impulses is the challenge we face to understand them, theorise and see their association. Its message, made of fragments, *spolia* that archaeology and other interpretative fields (art history, etc.) uncover, is constantly changing, reflecting sensibilities of the present. The fact that the monument has managed to survive since antiquity and has captured the interest of the successive generations of art lovers, even when the appreciation of the monument itself, its sculptural universe and its meaning remain contested and constantly changing, speaks to the success of this composition. The debates on some of the key questions about this monument: What was the intended message? What did viewers see? What does it tell us about the society of the 4th century AD? may never be conclusively resolved, but they are not debates looking for such resolution and definitive answers. Through the questions this object poses, new spaces of meaning and understanding emerge, and this is part of the legacy and enduring message of the arch of Constantine.

The General Theory: Reading a text that displays its “spolia” and argues with its readers

Spolia, in the direct way discussed above, can be defined as *spolia in se*, i.e., the real thing, pieces removed and placed in a different building than the one they were originally a part of. Brilliant (1982) used this term to distinguish this kind of *spolia* from *spolia in re*, which are “monuments or works of art purporting to belong to an earlier period by using typology, proportions or styles of the past” (Sande 2012: 287). It is interesting that Constantine’s arch displays both types of *spolia*. As we saw in the quote by Raphael, he praises the proportions of the arch and its overall construction, as it clearly follows the architectural example of the previous eras, and is thus an example of *spolia in re*,²³ while at the same time, some of its ornaments are *spolia in se*. This creates a complex set of allusions that blurs the lines of what is new and what is old, what is true and what is make believe.

Furthermore, this distinction is very useful if we move the object of enquiry from the question of buildings to that of texts and use the terminology of *spolia* there. Liverani (2011) attempts such transference by keeping *spolia in se* in its traditional definition by Brilliant but stretches the application of *spolia in re* to “the domain of metaphor” and iconic operation (Liverani 2011: 47). With this, Liverani places direct citations, allusion, copying of sentences, etc. in the domain of *spolia in re* – arguing that all this activity of textual reproduction and allusion is distinct to the original concept of appropriation by destruction of the previous edifice or object.

However, this taxonomy by Liverani is not granular enough to allow us to operationalise the *spolia* concept in interesting ways when doing literary analysis. As Liverani argues, simply saying that quotations in a text are *spolia*, and by extension that a text with quotations is an act of assemblage, does not take us very far. But if we attempt to refine our vocabulary, this perspective can help us arrive at more interesting insights. Another way to look at it is to build on this distinction between *spolia in re* and *spolia in se* as different types of *spolia* in a written text. We can therefore separate between a direct quotation or reference, the insertion of another text into the host text or an explicit appeal to some external text or author by mimicking the other text’s characteristics. This could mean mimic the language, structure, type of argument, that makes the text strongly allude to a specific literature or other text and almost, even, trying to pass as a piece of it. This can be even more pronounced if the allusion is to texts of a previous era or of a particular community, and the host text tries to borrow from those texts not only their style and overall structure of argument but also “social” elements (the culture, internal relations and modes of thought and articulation,

etc.), which it uses for its own purpose. In this case, *spolia in se* are the quotes and direct references, with the usual explicit paraphernalia of attribution being precise in convention and clear and fairly unambiguous notes to readers, and *spolia in re* become more elusive parts of the written text that allude to specific literature but are linked with it through intimation and suggestion, to use the terms of the Romantics. These two elements together, the explicit and the suggestive, constitute the rich textual bedrock on which readers build associations of the meaning of texts.

How can this analysis help us get an entry point into a text on economic theory? This is a difficult question that relates to the use of hermeneutics in understanding a text and decoding its meanings. The purpose of this section is to see if the insights of the concepts of fragments and spolia developed in the previous sections can shed new light on our understanding of a particular text in economic theory, Keynes' *General Theory*.

I have argued elsewhere (Repapis 2020) that Keynes' *General Theory* is more an exploration of the methodology an economist uses to solve or tackle problems in the real world than an attempt to create a set system of analysis, a treatise that completely defines and builds an exhaustive scheme at the level of theory which intends to be definitive. It is not devoid of theory, in fact, the book has little else; but what has puzzled readers since its publication in 1936 is how the different theory sections fit together and what is the overall structure of the argument.

Much work has gone into ascertaining how the relevant chapters fit together into one coherent whole and whether each chapter or some parts should be seen separately.²⁴ This has made the book not only difficult to comprehend for readers who are looking for a treatise in the tradition of classical and neoclassical economics but has also been the charge against it as an incomplete or contradictory, even ill-developed, piece of theoretical work, and therefore inferior to the classical treatises in economics by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, that it attempts, purportedly, to emulate. The holy grail of reading it in this way is to find the one key that would make all sections fall into place and give the work the singular unity on the plane of theory a classic treatise in economics and political economy is expected to display.

However, if we attempt to see this kind of reading that well-intending readers have attempted since the *GT's* publication in relation to the arch of Constantine, we can see that it may be a futile project. In both cases, the attempt to find a single key that encapsulates the complete and final message of both text and object runs quickly aground as all unidimensional narratives fail to account for some element of the composition. As noted in the previous section, there is reason to believe that the arch of Constantine is nebulous in its message exactly because its pictorial and other

elements were intended to be read in different ways by different viewers and not appeal to the same sensibilities in all viewers.

In the case of the *General Theory*, this characteristic comes through by a variety of means. It comes through by the use of different modes of expression, where the language shifts from axiomatic assertions and analytical prose, occasionally fused by mathematical argument, to broad discussions in a conversational manner, historical examples and generalisations, and even the use of asides, vignettes, irony and self-negation.²⁵ Thus, one finds the following passage:

VI. With the aid of the notation introduced in chapter 20, we can, if we wish, express the substance of the above in symbolic form.

Let us write $MV=D$ where M is the quantity of money, V is its income-velocity (this definition differing in the minor respects indicated above from the usual definition) and D the effective demand...

(Keynes 1936: 304)

And a few pages before, the book directly refers to this passage with the following words:

The object of our analysis is, not to provide a machine, or method of blind manipulation, which will furnish an infallible answer, but to provide ourselves with an organised and orderly method of thinking of particular problems; and, after we have reached a provisional conclusion by isolating the complicating factors one by one, we then have to go back to ourselves and allow, as well as we can, for the probable interactions of the factors amongst themselves. This is the nature of economic thinking. Any other way of applying our formal principles of thought (without which, however, we shall be lost in the wood) will lead us into error. It is a great fault of symbolic pseudo-mathematical methods of formalising a system of economic analysis, such as we shall set down in section VI of this chapter, that they expressly assume strict independence between the factors involved and lose all their cogency and authority if this

hypothesis is disallowed; whereas, in ordinary discourse, where we are not blindly manipulating but know all the time what we are doing and what the words mean, we can keep ‘at the back of our heads’ the necessary reserves and qualifications....

(Keynes 1936: 297)

Thus, the book has both formal mathematical language, which is a needed vestment for transmitting its ideas to a professional class of economists but at the same time cautions the reader, in the strongest possible terms, about accepting these very constructs, and asks them to think outside these terms, which are not really vital to the argument. Keynes does not only play between verbal narrative and mathematical symbolic formal language but also discusses what kind of narrative would suit different types of questions. For example, he writes:

So far we have been primarily concerned with the way in which changes in the quantity of money affect prices in the short period. But in the long run is there not some simpler relationship?

This is a question for historical generalisation rather than for pure theory.

(Keynes 1936: 306)

The text shifts between different types of narrative that it appropriates for its different and sometimes conflicting insights. These can be seen as attempts of *spolia in re*. The form of expression is used so that the reader, by association, admits this text within the company of texts that it emulates and indirectly borrows legitimacy from. For example, the reader is expected to understand the rules of mathematical modelling, verbal theorising and historical digression and admit these as accepted forms of argument and information transmission. Each has its remit and specific purpose, both as an act of rhetoric, to convince the reader, and as a vessel of information that carries a message. The final text is an act of assemblage of these different narratives exactly because it does not try to paper over the differences when presenting them to the reader, or even to hide that its use of these alternative forms of expression is partly a rhetorical device, and the reader may not have to take part of the text too seriously. The text warns and even argues with the

reader on the very theory the text is trying to transmit. Therefore, the final work is by construction formed by parts, whose fit is far from perfect, and that, itself, is part of the message.

The effort of the text to display scepticism about the very forms through which it tries to relay its message is part of a deeper agenda on how Keynes sets and orients his book. The very first chapter of the GT starts with a broad claim on the nature of this theoretical exercise:

I shall argue that the postulates of the classical theory are applicable to a special case only and not to the general case, the situation which it assumes being a limiting point of the possible positions of equilibrium. Moreover, the characteristics of the special case assumed by the classical theory happen not to be those of the economic society in which we actually live, with the result that its teaching is misleading and disastrous if we attempt to apply it to the facts of experience.

(Keynes 1936: 3)

From its title and first pages, the book makes the claim that it intends to provide a more general theory of the economy to what existed before, which it intends to assimilate as a special case. In the first footnote, it mentions by name the theorists that form this classical corpus of economic theory, and Keynes writes the following:

The classical economists was a name invented by Marx to cover Ricardo and James Mill and their *predecessors*, that is to say for the founders of the theory which culminated in the Ricardian economics. I have become accustomed, perhaps perpetrating a solecism, to include in the classical school the *followers* of Ricardo, those, that is to say, who adopted and perfected the theory of Ricardian economics, including (for example) J.S. Mill, Marshall, Edgeworth and Prof. Pigou.

(Keynes 1936: 3)

Keynes in this footnote achieves a double purpose. First, he puts himself on par with Marx, saying outright that he can recompose past economics and their theoretical output into a new grouping that does not respect existing lines of

demarcation. The act of delineating schools of economic thought is not any more an objective exercise but one of personal choice. An act of solecism that a writer can enforce, and Keynes, without apology does, to reveal new insights. Second, by this re-ordering, Classical and Neoclassical theory become fused in one canon, with writers that stretch from Ricardo to Pigou. This act has shocked and bewildered even some prominent Keynesians since publication, who have returned to the usual demarcations of Classical and Neoclassical schools trying to fit Keynes' theory sometimes in the first and sometimes in the second grouping, politely ignoring the parts of the text that do not go with the specific reading they are imposing on the book.

It is useful here to think again of the *spolia in se* category, which has the closest association with the violence of the act of despoiling an old building to beautify a new one. In its essence, the shock tactic employed by Keynes is not very different. He dissociates these prominent writers from their customary groupings and the normal way their theoretical output is viewed and forces them together to form this new theoretical pillar that his book stands in opposition to. He uses them in the same way that Constantine's Arch despoils Trajan's Arch, chisels his face on Trajan's body and puts the re-worked *spolium* in his arch to celebrate both him and Trajan. It is both an act of sacrilege and an act of homage.

However, it should be noted that Keynes does not do this re-ordering in order to impose a new dogmatic reading of all these writers and weave a definitive theoretical scheme of the economic system. Instead, he advocates an open-ended approach to the economy that asks the reader to train in several modes of thought and expression and use their judgement for the questions they need to tackle. This gives the book the particular position within the canon of classic texts in economics it inhabits today. At one end, it is obviously a treatise of economic theory that proposes a new catholic view of the social and economic order of society. At the other end, it is a very different book to the treatises of Adam Smith, or John Stuart Mill or David Ricardo, or Alfred Marshal. Here again, the parallel with Constantine's arch may be useful as an exploration on the peculiarity of Keynes' text. The arch is without question an ancient Roman triumphal arch, and yet there is a world of difference between that arch and those of the "good emperors" it tries to associate with and even in parts emulate. Equally, the *General Theory* is a grand work in economics, the same way the arch of Constantine is a Roman imperial arch. But its message is more layered, complex and demanding for the viewer than other works, and its form, although sharing many similarities of language, style and purpose with the classical treatises of economics, is, at the same time, a very different construction. The difficulty is not that it asks readers to get accustomed to a new symbolic language which they have not encountered before, as perhaps other

theoretical works in mathematics or economics require. Its difficulty is that it references a whole ecosystem of literature which the reader must have encountered and assimilated prior to attempting the *General Theory*. It requires good knowledge of Classical and Neoclassical theory for the reader to be able to penetrate somewhat this book – in the same way that the viewer of the arch would understand more about it if they knew where the *spolia* that are so visible, came from.

The *General Theory* asks the reader not to a *nuovo* learn a new language, but the more difficult task of reflecting on the language the reader already speaks, see it anew, and question its limits. More importantly, because of this game of intimation and suggestion, rather than straightforward instruction and indoctrination to a new mode of thought and expression, both the arch and the *General Theory* appear inexhaustible and, although so context bound and therefore fragile because of their demand of knowledge of outside sources, great survivors. They are survivors exactly because each period and each reader/viewer is inspired to form their own readings and message of the text, with the objects offering their spoils to frame the spectator's imagination in a dynamic way with no expiry date. Constantine's arch has been discussed since the renaissance both as an indication of the falling standards of the classical era and recently in more complex ways. But it has always been discussed without intermission. *The General Theory* has also had a varied reception since publication, and for reasons that mirror the discussion of Constantine's arch, it has divided its readership, but it has never ceased to excite interest and offer readers new insights.

Conclusion: Classical texts and modernity

This chapter tried to forge links between three different literatures, the literature on the romantic fragment, architectural investigations on spolia and economic theory. The broader unifying thread that connects these disparate literatures is, to some degree, the fact that they may be part of a different canon of philosophical thinking to the one that focuses on completeness, objectivity, systemic thinking and knowledge acquisition in a direct and unproblematised way. As Schlegel argues, “A classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it” (Critical Fragments no. 20 in Schlegel 2002a: 239). It is interesting to observe that both Schlegel and Keynes spoke of the importance of principles of thought, or formal theorising, and yet both found this to be not the end but the beginning of an exploration into the nature of reality. Formal systems are treated by these authors in the same way that the architectural principles of building a triumphal arch is a necessary prerequisite in order to understand Constantine’s arch. But it is only a first step in a very long process of trying to decode the object.

The intellectual and aesthetic tradition of the romantics, and their method of thought and investigation, added new tools and perspectives on the canon of western thought. The singularity of modernity does away with the principle that general rules can be used to mimic and thus represent reality. Unidimensional representations do not seem to suffice anymore, because reality has become complex in ways that has no counterpoint in previous eras. This realisation both celebrates the artistic and literary heritage of the past and brakes resolutely with it in mode of thought and expression.

The importance of fragments at this juncture should not be understated. As articulations, they become an elemental building block of understanding. In this way, we return to Schlegel’s message that even complete systems of analysis are fragments of a greater whole, never realised, and whose shape constantly changes as the future unfolds. Keynes’ book exemplifies this reasoning. By moving the message of *the General Theory* from the realm of theory to more explicitly that of methodology and ontology, Keynes is able to appropriate whole systems of theoretical analysis and their armoury as *spolia* that signify fragments of a complex social reality that can never settle into one definitive narrative. The book admits that it cannot provide us with a compact theoretical system that can act as the definitive theoretical apparatus in the field of economics but intends to make the reader start a personal journey of exploration and reflection that excites and develops the reader’s imagination.²⁶ In this, it constantly argues with its readers and

their preconceptions, undermining every effort to take a single message as the one key to the text. It acts as a reflective piece that intends to make the reader aware of the various languages that can be developed in economics and the limits these languages have. The nature of this approach allows the opening of new spaces of theory and theoretical experimentation that can be added to the *General Theory* as blank pages yet to be written, as *spolia* from the future the book enabled to come into existence and thus retrospectively appropriates as the text and its communicated message unfold through time.

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² As D. Rauber notes in his seminal contribution “the fragment can be viewed as that form which more completely than any other embodies romantic ideals and aims” (Rauber 1969: 212).

³ Another translation by Otabe Tanehisa of the same fragment is “many works of the ancients have become fragments. Many works of the moderns are fragments at the time of their origin” (Tanehisa 2009: 59).

⁴ This re-asserts the key role that fragments play in creating an alternative interpretative tradition and also a counterpoint to the Enlightenment viewpoint. Janovich notes

amongst the German writers associated with the Jena School and the journal *The Atheneum* (1798–1800), the fragment structure was held up by literary theorists as the model for a new kind of poetic originality freed from the constraints and forms of the classical genres.

(Janowitz 2001: 479)

⁵ The Athenaeum Fragments, which first appeared in June 1798, were written as stand-alone aphorisms by different authors. This is one visual textual representation of the autonomy of each fragment as a separate self-supporting entity.

⁶ This is exactly what Schlegel does when he says that a text is effectively an agglomeration of fragments. He writes “A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a large scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments...” Atheneum fragments no. 77 (Schlegel 2002b: 248). Therefore, Schlegel interprets what he reads in a fragmentary way as a reading strategy. Fragment becomes the tool through which he approaches works of literature of any tradition that would be conceived, through conventional means, as complete- or at least as non-fragmentary.

⁷ See (Brilliant and Kinney 2011, Kinney 2019) as possible entry points to a huge literature.

⁸ Greenhalgh writes *spolia*

in the strict classical sense refers to armour and weapons ..., which were taken from the defeated then preserved and displayed. The most prominent were the *spolia opima*, spoils taken by a Roman commander-in-chief from a defeated monarch and displayed in a triumph.

(Greenhalgh 2011: 78)

As Greenhalgh notes that the term is emotionally charged, it does not only mean disposition and appropriation but it also signals victory and defeat. And yet these complex layers are not so easy to disentangle – in a building a stone that displays its association and makes clear reference to the previous owner isn't itself a story of victorious survival? What *spolia* at the very least do is bring any past association into the present. This association becomes a living dialogue and part of present reality.

⁹ It would be impossible here to offer a succinct definition of the term that captures almost all its use and avoid controversies. I have tried to despoil a reference for a good enough definition but to no avail. The field has become

so broad that the term is both quite specific and at the same time so multi-faceted that it must remain somewhat undefined. Kinney aptly writes “this returns us to the categorical definition of spolia, a definition that grows even more elusive as the field continues to expand” (Kinney 2019: 349). Kinney (2019) is probably the best starting point to give a broad survey of the current state and use of the term spolia.

¹⁰ Violence is part of the definition and it’s one of the ongoing discussions in the literature, if spolia as a term should be replaced by the less emotive term of “reuse”. There is disagreement if these terms should be used interchangeably, and most theorists do not use them in such a way. For the purposes of this chapter, the term *spolia* is more apt – it speaks more of the layers of intention when there is this reuse alluding also to the complex nexus of meanings intentional reuse of older material entails – destruction, symbolism, functionality, power, association, historical memory, etc.

¹¹ This general condition does not mean that all buildings of the past used *spolia*, as other cultural, material and aesthetic realities played a role. But the general argument is that it made more sense when there was some repetition in building materials and techniques across time and epochs, and that changed to a large extent by the industrial revolution and the way primarily materials are used from then on. The creation of industrial standardization makes reuse and spoliation, in most cases, a more expensive process, than simply using new material that reproduces a prefabricated result. For modern buildings to assimilate part of pre-existing ones either *in situ* or by quarrying older buildings in the vicinity for anything other than ornamental purposes entails a substantial cost. This leads me to the generalisation that modern *spolia*, when present, are not of necessity but of intent, whereas previous eras used *spolia* for a variety of purposes, that merged functional and ornamental use.

¹² This claim is made by (Kinney 2012: 5).

¹³ See Elsner (2000) and Feris (2013) for a detailed description.

¹⁴ A practice which makes the whole symbolism of what he is trying to do more difficult to comprehend, i.e., defacing those emperors of the past you try to associate yourself with. If Constantine ordered this naively to use the spoils hoping viewers will not know of his act of *damnatio memoriae*, this would be odd since if viewers did not know where he took these *spolia* from this action alone negates his fairly obvious effort of association with the past. If they do, and he hoped they would not notice, it excites ridicule from the viewers he tries to impress. If he does this to show how he can surpass and deface even the good emperors in glory, then it is an act of delusion that would again, possibly, alienate his viewers and make the message complex if somewhat original. This reading of this act

makes the jarring symbolism of a triumphal arch against another Roman (already ethically difficult waters) a triumphal arch against all Roman history, and the city of Rome itself. Perhaps, it intended to intimidate anyone who questions his authority, in covert ways that we miss today. Maybe, it was an underhand effort by the senate, who was overseeing the construction of the arch, to pass a message of discontent and disobedience or irony, negating in subtle ways the purported message of a thankful and servile senate on the arch. Who can tell? It would be interesting to contemplate another possibility. That this emblematic building which does not intend to simply reproduce the artistic forms of the past, also intends to signal a break with the mores of the past. It intends to tell the viewer that the previous era of classical Rome has morphed into something new in political, moral, religious and aesthetic terms and this necessitates the pillaging and re-possession of the past in ways that would have been impossible before. In the same way that this arch and its sculptural universe could not be erected in the times of Marcus Aurelius, so we can say that the morals of what you can and cannot do symbolically in the times of Marcus Aurelius shifts by the times of Constantine. Too much had happened, and this is a new era. The intention is exactly to display this message, as clearly as possible, even if this is done with some violence.

¹⁵ In a very recent contribution Rose (2021) argues that the frieze itself that has until now been attributed to Constantine by almost all scholars as a new sculpture of this period probably made directly for the arch is, in fact, (mostly) from a slightly earlier decade, most probably commissioned by Diocletian for his Vicennalia in AD 303, for a triumphal arch for him that was not completed. This would make almost all the art on Constantine's arch repossessed from other buildings, which itself would be a very interesting result. The argument that the arch itself as a building is older than Constantine's reign has been noted before – see endnote 23 below for the relevant literature.

¹⁶ Elsner rightly notes that the interpretative line that speaks of decline in form did in fact make an important point – that of fundamental change in Roman art. As he writes

the Arch did precipitate a fundamental and radical set of changes in Roman visual practice which the style merchants may have identified in ways that now seem outmoded and inappropriate, but which none the less did happen.

(Elsner 2000: 152)

¹⁷ As Ernst Kitzinger perceptively notes “[In the frieze] differences in the physical size of figures drastically underline differences of rank and importance which the second-century artist had indicated by subtle compositional

means within a seemingly casual grouping. Gone, finally are elaboration of detail and differentiation of surface texture. Faces are cut rather than modelled, hair takes the form of a cap with some superficial stippling, drapery folds are summarily indicated by deeply drilled lines” (Kitzinger 1977: 8).

¹⁸ *Liberalitas* was a well-established custom by this time, practiced by Emperors throughout the centuries, so the act itself would not be a novelty. However, it is interesting to consider how this custom was depicted in different ages and the changes in iconography. On the frieze, the depiction is both realistic, actual distributing of coin, and symbolic, in that the bodies, composition of scene, etc. do not have the realism of the older fragments but are in the new style.

¹⁹ It would again be interesting to consider the problem of the frieze’s provenance. If it is from an unfinished arch devoted to Diocletian as Rose (2021) argues, that the Roman population would know about, then the frieze would be coming directly from the time of the Diocletian edicts against the Christians. If this is true, then the intended message through this spolium could have the opposite outcome than approaching the Christian population, but instead implicitly alienating it, and signal something very different. Then, again, if it is a spolium from Diocletian that Constantine appropriates and adds his head where Diocletian’s was, this could be seen as an act of undoing a wrong. It can even be read as the triumph of Christianity over the persecutions. The veil of history is too thick to pierce. We will never know what exact interpretation this spolium took in the minds of contemporary viewers if indeed all viewers decoded it in one way, which seems unlikely.

²⁰ It is worth noting here Deichmann’s observation that there was a new aesthetic preference for diversity and pattern in the developing Christian architecture. In the new basilicas, *spolia* columns constituted a new “order” that replaced the visual universe of the old Roman and Greek orders (see Diechmann 1940).

²¹ Pierce notes that the monument has no clear explicit Christian symbols (Pierce 1989: 406). What we are left with is suggestion and interpretation of “odd” novelties. This itself points to the kind of romantic notion of never being entirely sure – one can develop an argument and yet the opposite argument is equally plausible. Constantine did not really make any allusions to Christianity but was simply using what material he had available to build an arch in the traditional manner. Neither narrative can be completely proved, and the power of the monument is exactly that – that it allows new interpretative lines without putting to rest the old ones.

²² As Pierce perceptively writes “by the time of Marcus Aurelius the virtues of the emperor had become something of a cliché” (Pierce 1989: 410) and therefore reaffirming them in pictorial compositions on the arch showed the

continuation of ancient traditions – a reassuring note to the upper classes who were looking for stability and respect of customs in the new order.

²³ Assuming, of course, that the arch was not created before Constantine’s time. This is disputed by some archaeologists, see Frothingham (1912, 1913, 1915a, 1915b), although the current consensus is that it was made during Constantine’s time (see Kleiner 2001). But this adds to the interesting discussion on *spolia in re*, if they could make a building at the time of Constantine that could mimic so perfectly an arch of previous eras, we cannot claim that the age had been so unable to continue the artistic tradition of the past – therefore the use of the past, as well as the use of *spolia* signifies something else. More importantly, *spolia in re* create a category that adds to the ability of the object to relate to previous eras in new ways by playing on the very nature of time and authenticity. It instigates a complex dialogue with the viewer, not through decontextualisation of its message and appeal to a universal artistic language but by creating complex allusions to other periods and styles and involving the viewer on the question of what is original, what is new and what is the difference.

²⁴ I will not review this voluminous literature here, but perhaps the best entry point is Harcourt and Riach (1997) which has extensive discussions connected with specific chapters of the book.

²⁵ Irony plays an important part in the romantic literature. The whole concept of fragment and the inability to reach a completeness that is always elusive brings forth irony. Schlegel writes that “[irony] contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication”, Critical Fragments no. 108 (Wheeler 1984: 43). Thus, irony is embedded in the process of understanding – the reader understands part of the message the text attempts to convey, but at the same time they become aware that they do not have a complete understanding, a full picture and are constantly betrayed by the text as soon as they try to move closer to this end.

²⁶ Imagination is a key concept both for Keynes and for the Romantics. As Rauber notes,

we have already touched indirectly upon the supreme importance placed by the romantic mind on the creative imagination, as it applies to reader as well as to poet. But the fragment is a peculiarly potent means of eliciting an active imaginative response.

(Rauber 1969: 221)

Therefore, both the Romantics and Keynes looks to the reader as an equal to the writer, asking the reader to complete the intellectual journey with the text acting only as the starting point.