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Tracking Disgust

Robert Rawdon Wilson. *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust.*

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Imagine the many-headed Hydra, the mythical swamp-monster of Herakles' second "Labour" whose heads grow redoubled each time one is severed. Outrageously fecund, huge, lethally poisonous and stinking, she is a nightmarish vision that exceeds time, reaching out of classical mythology to the SF horror of *Aliens*. As Robert Wilson demonstrates, she is an apt figure indeed to head a cross-disciplinary exploration of disgust, a tale that he pursues across time and cultures with the vigor and persistence of a Herakles all too aware that the next challenge is not the last. The pursuit is fascinating if, at times, designedly gut-wrenching. Interested always in theory, in explanatory models and their limitations, and claiming tales from personal experience that are interspersed with a vast array of references to psychology, philosophy, anthropology, art and aesthetics, and, above all, to literature, he presents a study that is decidedly scholarly in its attention to ideas and to sources and anecdotal in its mixing of modes.

Why "disgust"? Why devote this amount of research to such a thoroughly unpleasant subject? In one form or another, disgust seems as common a human affect as delight. In one of its registers, the other (or an other) side of desire, it sits close in experience and in the imagination, working as a negative in association with slime, shit, putrescence and death, all of which have their parts in this investigation, and serving, as well, and paradoxically, to sharpen

delight and desire. If it is a learned response that often involves transgression (of the supposedly normal and acceptable), it may be spontaneous (as in our common nose-twisting reaction to stench), or moral or psychosexual in its formation. Certainly, as Wilson demonstrates voluminously, disgust provokes the imagination, throughout history and in ways that are not only important to the definition of experience but that serve, as well, to indicate motivations, preferences and patterns in constructions of behaviour, acceptability and the social fabric. The short answer, then, to the complex question of "why disgust?" is that this is a study of matters elemental to the definition of human action and social formations.

As one would expect, there are seminal figures here: for theories of disgust, Freud, Bakhtin, Bataille, Sartre, Deleuze (and Guattari) and a range of others, and for literary references, Spenser, Dante, Shakespeare, de Sade, Joyce, Lessing, Gibson, Pynchon, Ballard, Rushdie, Ellis and Wallace. But this is a very short list; the study is notable for its extraordinary range of references, many of them developed in finely detailed footnotes. Emphasising the difference between actuality and representation, between first-hand experience of disgust and its representation in art or writing, Wilson proposes five models for its investigation: moral-legal, social constructionist, psychoanalytic, slime-viscosity-dissolution, and transgression. No single model, he suggests, can explain disgust fully and, thereby, there is an appropriate flexibility in his attention to models, writers and ideas. The study is investigatory; it proceeds by a process of informed and eclectic accumulation that serves, simultaneously, to explain and to complicate the field. If disgust involves transgression of boundaries, then, clearly, it involves not only consideration of the composition and status of those boundaries with respect to private-public spheres (and all of the moral, legal, sexual, social factors that might be involved) but also issues of kind, circumstance and degree. If in some primary sense, disgust is physical, and bodily, it also may be manifest as disapproval, outrage, or contempt (which moves response from spontaneous physical revulsion to psycho-intellectual categories - not that these are so simply separable). The link that Wilson emphasises

is the imagination and, particularly given his range and modes, this book may be read as a study of the imagination at work.

There are many confessional, cards-on-the-table, moves:

For a book such as this one, the subject is everywhere and in everyone. And, although this book is not intended to be an exercise in gonzo cultural theory, the subject is both within and close to the author himself. I have long been interested in disgusting things. Sometimes I strike others as having a genuine enthusiasm, almost teenage in its spontaneity, for slimy, deliquescent rot. More certainly, I take a writer's pleasure in metaphors, the imaginative constructions that actual disgusting things can make possible. And I have also, I believe, a scholar's interest in the what (or who), why, when and how of disgust (xii).

The scholar's interest is everywhere evident in the multitudinous frames of reference and the investigatory method. His claims to first-hand experience are presented in the narratives with which each chapter begins: of worms in an apple and remembrance of flies, maggots, food and revulsion; childhood, peaches and their metaphoric associations; his experience as a young merchant seaman in San Francisco of a golden shower; riding a motorcycle in total darkness down the Wasatch mountains into Salt Lake City; meeting with a "Sports Bore" on a Toronto-Ottawa train trip; an encounter in a tough bar, the Calico Cat in South Chicago; meetings in Chicago with a brilliant student of philosophy whose horrific self-torment is linked to childhood sexual abuse; and bus travel in Paris where a young female passenger becomes a figure for speculation of the trace. As these anecdotes lead into consideration of literary-aesthetic representations and studies, they not only provide formal variation in this multi-layered text. In addition, they serve to illustrate the claim that disgust, in one form or another, is "everywhere" in human experience, if not directly manifest then lurking ambiguously (like a many-headed Hydra) in our appetites, training, perceptions and responses and

limbering up, vigorous and athletic, for metaphoric displacements in the mazy processes of the imagination at work, which is to say, at play.

Play is an important part of this study - play as slippage, association, invention, duplicity and high-spirited invitation. By turns, cajoled, affronted and entertained, the reader is invited to participate in an exploration that is likely to seem both familiar and strange, a labyrinthine journey into the stuff of nightmare as waking reality together with a reminder about responses and attitudes that lurk, variously, at the surface of consciousness. As a challenging *magister ludi*, the author speaks in the many tongues of a densely-referenced discourse. It is what we might expect of one whose books include an erudite study of play (*In Palamedes' Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, and Narrative Theory*, 1990) and another of narrative modes in Shakespeare (*Shakespearean Narrative*, 1995). Alongside his considerations of Freud, Bataille, Sartre and co, Wilson's attention to Menippean satire, Bakhtin and the carnivalesque, possible worlds theory, and notions of play and game results in a very lively text that favours diversity over reduction, enquiry over finality.

There are differences between actual experiences of disgust (such as those the author claims in his autobiographical narratives), disgust performances (he refers to Shock Art, the Jim Rose Circus and scumrock theatre) and the multifarious forms, range and registers of its representation. While making these and other distinctions, and while analysing each, Wilson is most attentive to representations of disgust. One of his leading references, *Hamlet* becomes, for example, a multiple resource file for the rhetoric of filth and disease, Menippean satire, deception, psychosexual revulsion, death and dissolution, and fictional world theory. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (with the infamous *fatwa*) is taken to present interwoven operations of hate, disgust, offence, belief systems and threats of repression and violence. Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, on the other hand, offers a literary example of self-disgust and abjection, details held to be particular but also emblematic and analysed with reference to writings on the body, gender, aversion and the abject. Literary examples predominate but

Wilson's extensive attention to film includes references to the work of such directors as Luis Bunuel, David Cronenberg, David Lynch, Ridley Scott and Martin Scorsese.

The study is presented in seven main chapters that take aspects of the Hydra as headings: The Hydra's Spoor (Loathsomeness), Its Stench (Conceiving Disgust), Its Lair (The Representation of Filth), Its Body (Parts and Machines), Its Many Eyes (Imagining Disgust), Its Heads (Perverse Geometries) and Its Venom (Feeling Abject). The procedure involves interplay - an interweaving of definition and example with the complications of cross-disciplinary frames of reference, and interspersed with such reading guides as the following:

I am arguing first, that disgust can be simulated, both in actual life and in literature as representation; it can be imitated on the face (as contempt or personal theatre) and it can be transformed, as representation, into high art; second, that the boundaries that locate disgusting objects and acts, that constitute 'dirt out of place,' can be crossed repeatedly, both learned and unlearned; third, that disgust engages the imagination to envision small, often quite minimal, fictional worlds ('disgust-worlds' in which loathsomeness dominates); and finally, that the operations of disgust, though open to analysis from several directions and to several kinds of disciplinary taxonomy, cannot be fully accounted for without reference to the experience of art, and in particular literature (127-8).

The chapter from which this comes ("The Representation of Filth") begins with the young man's meeting with Georgie in San Francisco (the "golden shower" story) and it includes references to Sartre's fiction, de Sade, boundaries and transgression, punk behaviour, Bakhtin and laughter, Kristeva and the abject, Elizabeth Grosz and the body, *Othello*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Erving Goffman on social encounters, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Bunuel's *The Phantom of Liberty*, *The Winter's Tale*, Baudelaire, Gass, Rilke, *Hamlet*, classical mythology, Faulkner's

Light in August, Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Spenser, Freud, Dante, Stephen King, Rushdie, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the fiction of Patrick White, and fifteen pages of detailed footnotes.

Robert Wilson is Professor Emeritus from the English Department of the University of Alberta. *The Hydra's Tale* suggests that he is very well-travelled in the world (North America, Europe, Australia and South America in particular) and in the 'worlds' of literature, film, philosophy, psychology, and social analysis. Ambitious and provocative, his study of "disgust" is a huge undertaking, the result of an impressive amount of research and consideration. With a cover that uses Moreau's painting *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* and design details that complement the text, the University of Alberta Press has produced a handsome book.