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... a fiddlehead, that small plant  
that grows in the Saint John River valley  
in the spring, and which is said to be  
symbolic of the sun.

Alfred Bailey  
February 1945  
(first issue of *The Fiddlehead*)

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# Reviews

## *The Fetid Zone*

*The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust*, Robert Rawdon Wilson. Edmonton: U Alberta P, 2002.

*The Hydra's Tale* is a far-ranging discussion of a group of important and ever-present, actual-world phenomena: loathing, aversions, phobias and disgust. The discussion ranges from what happens in the world to how representations of filth work and achieve their effects in art, film and fiction. There are frequent shifts from tight argument, and the "subtextual dungeon of documentation" (299), to personal tales, yarns, anecdotes and fables. The fiction is scattered throughout the book, some of it even appearing in the endnotes. The endnotes are a treat in themselves. Some of the pleasures of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* nudge the reading experience. *The Hydra's Tale* is essentially a work of theory, but one based on readings of multiple texts, including film, and experience equally diverse (imaginative, personal and vicarious). Wilson's study of/on the theory of disgust is far from being disgusting. Instead, it is informative, entertaining, engaging, even moving (as one might not expect from a book on theory). It is crafted as a textual labyrinth, designed with architectural care, in which different planes, shelves and trajectories cross over, and through, one another. There are also quite a few self-contained nooks and niches.

Each of the book's seven chapters and conclusion takes a part of the mythological Hydra's body as a symbolic rubric. For example, chapter two ("Its Stench") treats the problem of having a theory of disgust while chapter three ("Its Lair") considers the important, if often ignored, distinction between disgusting things in the world and their representations in art. Is there a difference between seeing, or participating in, a golden shower and only reading about one, or seeing one danced in a ballet? (Or imagining Danaë being thus inseminated?) Chapter seven ("Its Venom") discusses the destructive nature of feeling abject. The rubrics are more provocations than road-maps. The latter do appear, in both the introduction and the conclusion and at other points along the route of the discussion, as if the author knew that his method might prove perplexing. Although he makes demands upon his readers (and it is refreshing to have such demands made if, like me, you like to dance), Wilson's sudden changes in pace, shifting from the rhythms of one world of discourse to another, do not obscure the clarity of the argument.

Wilson argues cogently, if complexly, that disgust is a commonplace human affect, or reaction-formation, that seems obvious. Something disgusts you because it is loathsome, filthy, out of place or otherwise anomalous (from a personal world-view). A person realizes that the thing she sees is disgusting because

she feels nausea, experiences gagging and may, as a consequence, vomit. Disgust begins in what William Ian Miller, in his *Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), calls the "fetid zone of ... life soup, the roiling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot, and regeneration" (303, n. 3). Since, in this view, disgust is so self-evidently *natural*, its attendant theories are correspondingly simple, straight-forward and (as theoretical models) streamlined. Disgust is either a natural response to ugly facts or else a conditioned response acquired during your earliest social formation. In either case, it is invariant, subject to change only in the event of madness or dementia. It is also primary material for moralists. Miller, for example, argues that disgust underlies laws since it would be impossible to prohibit an action if it were not already commonly found to be disgusting. Other moralists use "disgust" as a weapon in ethical, religious and cultural wars. It is a common insult which, though empty, few receive cheerfully. Wilson notes that George Eliot's *Middlemarch* uses "disgust" at least forty-six times, but no one vomits (9). It is entirely a moral judgment, coupling a veiled insult, but its usefulness derives from preconceptions about in-the-world disgust and a facile assumption that everyone, right-minded people at least, will agree that disgust is obvious and self-evident.

Few things are further from the case than the obvious. Wilson unpacks a number of theories of disgust, showing how they cast a partial light upon the problem while utterly failing to explain the phenomenon. "Nothing could be more wrong than the naive and unexamined assumption that disgust is a 'natural' response," he writes, "but even vastly more subtle accounts fall short of the problem's complexity" (295). There are three main movements in the argument: 1) disgust is everywhere, "roiling" and muck-like, but it also shifts from culture to culture, from one historical period to another; 2) despite the rigid constructions of theory, the human response is metamorphic, always changing from one stage in experience to another; 3) disgust gestates in the imagination which responds to the world, and all its deliquescent sliminess, by creating momentary disgust "scenarios." One objection that Wilson raises against Miller's germinal book is that it ignores all art, film and literature. (He quotes an Australian scholar who had observed that writing a book on disgust without mentioning modern literature was similar to writing on mass destruction without mentioning anything since the Charge of the Light Brigade [406, n. 91].) Wilson's chapter five ("Its Many Eyes") explores the theory of the imagination, drawing upon phenomenologists, such as Sartre and Edward Casey, to conclude that the imagination takes the world as an archive of "props" out of which it reconstructs its experience. Disgust resides in the first place in the imagination and only secondarily in the visceral encounters of actual-world disgust.

This account of the imagination underlies Wilson's frequent shifts from one order of discourse to another. Fiction may not be the traditional vehicle for argument, but it is far and away the best for the presentation of the problem. Each chapter begins with an autobiographical tale that serves to focus the

central problem of the chapter. Thus chapter three begins with the memories of a dismally failed sexual encounter when the author was nineteen. A merchant seaman at the time, he meets an older woman in San Francisco who insists upon a golden shower. The experience nauseates the author, but it leads him in highly intricate ways into a web of overlapping issues involved in separating an act from its representation. Chapter 6 ("Its Heads"), which analyzes the "perverse geometries" the recognition of which inspires disgust at belief-systems and ideologies and leads to the creation of horror and terror scenarios (the distinction between which, Wilson makes splashingly clear), begins with the author's memories of three violent experiences concerning broken bottles in bars. Each chapter has its own specific autobiographical set-up. Here is an example from the Introduction where the author introduces a key point that individual disgust reactions, always highly metamorphic, change during the course of one's life experiences:

Once in the remote bush of Western Australia, I found the ground meat that I had intended to cook for dinner already fly-blown. It slithered with maggots, all performing their little humping crawl beneath the plastic covering. In a spasm of loathing, I threw the contaminated bundle into the rubbish, rushing to wash my hands as quickly as I could. However, an experienced bushman rescued the package and showed me how to cook the meat using a long-handled frying pan over an open fire. By keeping one side of the skillet relatively cool, slanted downwards and hanging out over the fire, he tricked the maggots, desperate to continue their minimal existence, into crawling out of the meat onto the cool side. He then dumped them into the fire and, presto! the meat was now ready to eat, savoury if not entirely appetizing. (A bit later, I learned that many bushmen would simply cook up the maggots in fly-blown meat, devouring the ugly dish without qualms as just "protein.") For many people, such as my mother, the taboos that govern disgust-reactions might still operate. A numbing sense of pollution would still make the meat impossible to eat. The maggots in the fly-blown meat had vanished, but not the overpowering awareness that they had been there. (xii-xiii)

The story looks forward to the later discussion of shifts in disgust responses, the centrality of eating (and food) to the argument, the wide-spreading sense of pollution that follows disgust like a personal plague, and the deep human feeling of fragility and openness to contamination.

*The Hydra's Tale* offers the reader fresh insights into the phenomenon of disgust and into the encompassing issues of theory. It is strong on the distinction between in-the-world disgust and representations of disgust in art, a far more useful distinction in my opinion than the one between fiction and non-fiction (a boundary that Wilson takes, and gives, delight in transgressing). Some writers, such as Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Proust, Joyce and

Borges, find ways to bring all of literature into specific moments in their texts, including the processes of writing and reading and the blurring of boundaries. Readers who can navigate such cross-temporal, cross-lingual, cross-cultural writers will not find Wilson's strategies particularly strange, even though he reverses the normal relationship in which theory serves fiction. This reversal, and variations upon it, are not unheard of.

I enjoyed Wilson's book. Since *The Hydra's Tale* is notably cross-disciplinary, readers with a range of interests might enjoy it for all sorts of reasons other than aesthetic (brief histories of techniques of executions, and so on), but I responded primarily to its shifts in discursive levels and its multiple creation of passages of ficto-theory. It is obvious, I thought in reading, that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are easily as arbitrary and porous as Wilson insists.

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