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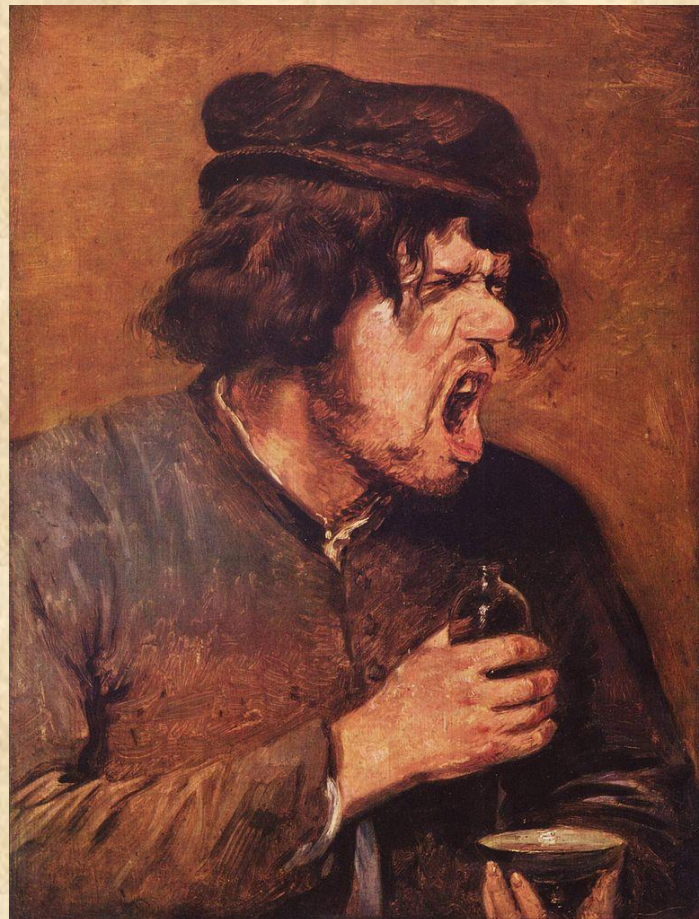
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*Skepsi*

University of  
**Kent**

# Disgust

Volume 8, Autumn 2017



***Phillis's Foul Linen: Sexual Disgust at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century***

Deborah Ross: *Hawai'i Pacific University*

**Nausea, 'the true seal of love'? Günter Grass' Many Uses of Disgust in *Die Blechtrommel***

Massimo Bonifazio: *Università di Torino*

**Dealing with Impurities of Childbirth. Contemporary Reconfiguration of Disgust in India**

Clémence Jullien: *LESC, Nanterre / CEIAS (EHESS) Paris*

**The Force of Disgust in Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness***

Martijn Buijs: *John Hopkins University Baltimore / ENS, Paris*

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COVER IMAGE: Adriaen Brouwer (c1605–1638): *The Bitter Potion*; original in the Städelches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt a. M. (image obtained through Wikimedia Commons)

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As always, we must say farewell to some of our members but welcome others. Marine Authier and Mylène Branco, both of whom were actively involved with the conference, have left us, and we wish them well. In their place, we welcome Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez, Joyce Leung and Aina Marti; Juan joined us after last year's conference, so too late to be mentioned in Volume 7, while Joyce and Aina joined us at the start of the current academic year. We are also pleased to welcome Harriet Clements back onto the Board as part of the Journal production team. Harriet left the Board after completing her academic studies but maintained her connection with *Skepsi* by continuing to manage copy editing and proof reading, her roles when she first became involved with *Skepsi* during the production of the first issue of the journal, Volume 1 (1): *Graft and Transplant: Identities in Question*, in 2008. She has been part of *Skepsi* almost since its inception in 2007, and her return to the Board coincides with *Skepsi*'s tenth year, which we're proud to celebrate.

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## Foreword

Roger Giner-Sorolla

*School of Psychology, University of Kent*

**B**oth social scientists and humanities scholars have enriched our understanding of disgust through their work. Where these two worlds communicate, the benefits are great. In my lab, experimental psychological studies of disgust and related emotions have been informed by philosophers' insights on the illiberality of disgust (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Nussbaum 2004) and by speculations from the humanities on disgust at bad moral character (Giner-Sorolla & Chapman 2016; Miller 1997). The scholars in this volume, who have shared their analyses of disgust in literature and society, often return the favour, citing psychological theory and research on the basic nature of disgust to support their observations.

Psychologists generally acknowledge that disgust's primordial purpose is to protect us from things that could make us ill: spoiled food, bodily wastes of others, cues to disease in physical appearance, death and decay. However, there has been wide diversity of opinion and evidence on what else disgust is about — and, indeed, for (Chapman & Anderson 2013; Russell & Giner-Sorolla 2013). Beyond the 'core disgust' of direct disease risks, disgust can be expressed towards the abnormal sexual acts of other people (Giner-Sorolla & others 2012); towards unfair actions (Cannon, Schnall & White 2012); towards markers of social distinctions (Tyler 2008); towards non-infectious physical conditions such as obesity (Lieberman, Tybur & Latner 2012); towards bodily functions that, even if healthy, remind us of our animal nature (Miller 1997; Goldenberg & others, 2001); towards unpleasant aesthetic targets (Silvia & Brown 2007); and towards harmful acts that show bad character (Giner-Sorolla & Chapman 2016).

These multiple uses of disgust can be explained through a cultural-evolutionary account in which the disease-protection functions of the emotion are exapted, just as anatomical structures in biological evolution over time can serve double duty (Giner-Sorolla 2012). The strong evaluations involved in disgust, the way in which the feeling is beyond discussion and argument (Russell & Giner-Sorolla 2011), and the avoidant and protective behaviour it inspires (van Overveld, de Jong, & Peters 2011) can all be made useful. Disgust feelings have ended up being recruited to protect one's core values, social position, existential peace of mind, and other intangible goods.

But, complicating matters, expressions of disgust may not always be backed up by the full disgust experience as usually understood. We may use the word 'disgust' as a linguistic



metaphor (Nabi 2002), communicate disgust to show our disapproval even when we feel anger (Kupfer & Giner-Sorolla in press), or condemn obese people as disgusting without showing it in spontaneous facial expressions (Vartanian & others 2017). Few studies look at the whole range of expressions and physiological changes accompanying disgust experiences in various contexts. Scholars in the humanities are likewise restricted to considering disgust through a prism of the language and imagery of personal and cultural expressions. Still, the four contributions to the issue show how useful a social approach to disgust can be, one that goes beyond the biological to consider how disgust has staked out a place in our consciousness of self and others.

In her article, Deborah Ross initiates a theme that recurs throughout these articles: how disgust at bodily processes and imperfections, in particular those of women, does the work of social contempt. Some Restoration-era poets sought to undercut the conventional idealised love poetry of the day with anatomically crude verses. Ross illustrates, through analysis of the works of Behn and Manley, how female critics of romantic conventions avoided this vulgarity. They focused instead on the *realpolitik* of male abuses of power or undercut male repulsion with invective against the lofty pedestals of physically perfect expectations. Meanwhile, the male poets Rochester and Swift were set on deploying disgust to drag women down to a lower level, whether or not the poet was content to wallow on that level himself. Ross ends by questioning whether disgust does enough to bring about meaningful change in heterosexual relationships. Although it may crack open some of the stale conventions, the contempt and avoidance that follow on from disgust are a poor foundation on which to build mutual respect and love.

Massimo Bonifazio links the multiple social and psychodynamic undertones of disgust in Grass' *The Tin Drum* through a common emphasis on food and eating. An emotion meant to keep us away from disease need not have anything special to do with eating or vomiting, yet the involvement of the gastric in the human emotion of disgust is undeniable (Meissner, Muth & Herbert 2011). Food imagery, as Bonifazio shows, pulls a single artistic thread through many different sources of disgust in Grass' writing: the sexual as well as the political, moral, and social. Here, the lack of disgust is as much on show as the presence of disgust, as characters engage apathetically or enthusiastically with sensations and situations that would repel the average reader. Because the sense of disgust develops reliably only at five years of age (Rottman 2014), Grass' decision to halt his protagonist's development at the age of three levels an implicit critique at the whole German nation for losing its sense of disgust at things which should repel it. The ambivalent role of smell in Oskar's sexual and social development,

however, leads to a similar conclusion to Ross' analysis. As Bonifazio puts it, 'overcoming the disgust seems to be this "seal of true love"'. Disgust, here, is in itself neither wise nor foolish but a guide that can go astray by abdicating its moral duty.

Clémence Jullien studies a social situation in which multiple meanings of disgust intersect and cover for each other. Untrained people approach the wet and infectious details of childbirth squeamishly. Medical professionals are supposed to overcome this disgust at the indignities of the human body, and most do. However, this does not mean they lose the capacity to be disgusted by other things, as research on medical students handling cadavers has shown (Rozin 2008). The obstetric professionals in India studied by Jullien indeed show no qualms about excretions and body parts that might evoke core disgust. Furthermore, they are legally prohibited from directly expressing their distaste at their patients' low caste and class origins. Nonetheless, some features of their patients do elicit strong and open expressions of disgust. These lie with plausible deniability at the boundary of the body and social identity, comprising perceived offences against taste and hygiene such as smell, hairiness, or tattoos. Jullien shows how such 'performances' of disgust may be intentionally exaggerated beyond actual sensory experience, a way to reinforce morale in the uncomfortable situation of dealing with social inferiors. At the same time, disgusted grimaces and exclamations, like the patronising language these doctors and nurses use, indirectly communicate to patients their proper place.

Finally, Martijn Buijs brings up disgust as an aesthetic emotion, a 'particularly visceral form of ugliness' that carried the standard for a movement in nineteenth-century European arts towards appreciating the force and immediacy of the unpleasant. The focal thinker of the essay, Rosenkranz, appreciates the repugnant only insofar as it can be contrasted to and overcome by the beautiful; to allow it uncontested primacy is to succumb to 'sickness', an apt metaphor given the biological functions of disgust. But the focal artist of the essay, Rimbaud, presents in the sonnet 'Venus Anadyomène' a surrender to this sickness, an unblinking look at the *belle hideusement* that crams its thesis statement and its grossest detail into its final line. The reader might profitably compare this lampoon of the idealised female in art to those in Ross' essay, which were produced two hundred years earlier. It is hard to escape the suspicion that, despite its more advanced development of a totalised aesthetics of the repulsive, Rimbaud's poem presents just as little room for the humanisation of the female subject, even as it topples the frothy image of the goddess into dirty bathwater.

Disgust is only superficially a superficial emotion. These four essays show in different ways how disgust stands at the boundaries of the body but reaches far within, a strong and

complex regulator of how we relate to ourselves and other people. Disgust is often seen as a way to reject and degrade people of a different sex, social class, or culture. This prejudicial use of the emotion is visible, explicitly or implicitly, in all the topics covered in this volume. Sex and gender figure strongly here because the anatomical parts and biological processes that underlie *la différence* also constitute objects of disgust. However, disgust can also be transformed dispassionately into an aesthetics that strives for impact over comfort, or transformed positively into an instinct that denounces those flaws of moral character that are hard to articulate in the language of costs and benefits. Scholarship in the humanities, and the social sciences, will always do well to consider both the attractions and the drawbacks of this multi-functional feeling.

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## Phillis's Foul Linen: Sexual Disgust at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century

Deborah Ross

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### Abstract

A recent trend among female comedians today is to prove they are as funny as men by engaging in humour that provokes disgust. In doing so they defy a long tradition that sees men's discourse about the body as frank and courageous, and women's as prudish and euphemistic. But a look at the gender wars of an earlier age may challenge this dichotomy. Comparing the writings of Rochester and Swift with those of their contemporaries Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley, one may appreciate the courage required to resist disgust, and to focus instead on love and beauty. For these women writers, that meant breathing new life into the pastoral, romantic conventions, inherited from Virgil and Ovid, that their male counterparts were attacking with satire. This observation may help us to reframe the current debate over the relative funniness of women, and to begin to seek an antidote to disgust suitable to our own time.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** female comedians, 'dirty' humour, satire, Rochester (John Wilmot), Jonathan Swift, Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, pastoral, gender war, disgust.



I used to hide what my vagina did to my underpants. And, by the way, what all vaginas do to all underpants, okay? There is no woman who ends her day with, like, a clean pair of underpants that look like they've ever even come from a store, okay? They look like little bags that have fallen face down in, like, a tub of cream cheese, and then, like, commando-crawled their way out. And then, like, carabinered up, like, into a crotch.

*Obvious Child* (2014)

The above epigraph, from the movie *Obvious Child* (2014), is part of a monologue recited by the protagonist, a young female stand-up comic. The description of her soiled underwear seems intended to prove, among other things, that women in comedy can be just as fearless as men in provoking disgust. In fact, it perfectly illustrates two main aspects of disgust introduced in an anecdote that has become fundamental to its study by modern theorists (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 23). In *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin described an encounter with a 'native' in Tierra del Fuego who was watching him eat potted meat: the softness of the meat disgusted the 'naked savage', who then touched it, causing

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015.

Darwin to feel disgusted in turn (123). The incident reveals both the primary evolutionary function of disgust: to prevent the ingestion of dangerous substances, and one of its secondary functions: to mark the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or those whose bodily secretions we are most and least willing to contact (Rozin and Fallon 26; Jones 2000). Both these functions operate in the movie monologue, as it virtually forces an audience of strangers to think about food — in this case cream cheese — contaminated by the comedian’s vaginal discharge. Disgusted the audience may be — but they will not be surprised if they have listened at all lately to real-life women in comedy, such as Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer, airing their dirty linen in public. Disgust, as they say in social media, is trending.

This development makes a certain amount of feminist sense. Given that in comedy a woman can be hooted off the stage with the declaration that ‘women aren’t funny’ (a phrase Bonnie McFarlane took for the title of her 2014 documentary), her very survival in the field depends on proving that women can do whatever men can do. And until recently, that has meant braving disgust. In a 1983 essay on ‘male humor’, Isaac Asimov explained that ‘dirty jokes’ provide an escape from ‘the distortions of social hypocrisy’ and are therefore ‘an important contributor to the mental health of males’. He invited women to join their brothers in this liberating enterprise, and thirty years later, women in comedy have taken up this invitation. In doing so, they also may appear to challenge a broader assumption, noted with great sympathy by John Stuart Mill in ‘The Subjection of Women’ (1869), that centuries of ‘subjection’ have made women too fearful of breaching social convention to create anything truly original, and for that reason they have failed to achieve ‘greatness’ in any of the arts (1970: 204).

Yet any historical view longer than one’s own generation will remind us that disgusting humour, though masculine, is far from new or original — and neither is the gender war that is now surfacing as a debate about the relative ‘funniness’ of women. More than three hundred years ago, male and female writers were already engaged in a contest over disgust. At the turn of the eighteenth century, male writers used scatological humour to deflate what they saw as false and dangerous romantic conventions. Yet during the same period, instead of imitating their male counterparts, women writers persisted in using those conventions without irony. Which side was really more brave, and more free? An examination of writings by John Wilmot, Lord Rochester and Aphra Behn in the 1670s and 1680s and by Jonathan Swift and Mary Delarivier Manley in the first decades of the eighteenth century may reveal that the male writers’ readiness to make aesthetic capital of disgust was the less courageous and less

liberating choice.<sup>2</sup> Rather, by resisting this trend, the women writers proposed an antidote to disgust, a means of achieving equal opportunity for women in love, and a truce in the gender wars. They also provided those of us revisiting their writings today with a way to reframe the issue of disgust in comedy and, perhaps, to imagine a different path to liberation.

First, however, some key concepts in recent disgust theory may help us to see why the language of disgust is not necessarily liberating, to women or to humans generally. Disgust is thought to arrive in children during toilet training and to peak again during puberty, when a desire for intimate contact with others competes with previously learned avoidance of strangers' bodily fluids (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 33–34). As William Miller remarks, 'A person's tongue in your mouth could be experienced as a pleasure or as a most repulsive and nauseating intrusion', and could go from one to the other within seconds as the specific relationship with the 'person' is forming (1997: 137). The resulting 'tension' (Asimov 1983) may be released in a 'dirty joke', and since until recently the joke-tellers have been male, their target is usually female. When women comedians appropriate these jokes, as in the *Obvious Child* monologue, they assume a male, disgusted gaze toward their own bodies — not a very helpful move given the role of self-disgust in the development of the various body dysmorphic disorders so prevalent among young women today (Onden-Lim and Grisham 2013). Furthermore, since 'taste' — the etymological converse of disgust — through metaphor expresses a culture's moral and aesthetic values (Jones 2000), these jokes may reinforce the misogyny that persists beneath the politically correct surface of our social conventions.

Nor is the language of disgust necessarily as freeing for men as Asimov contended. Basic, food-based disgust tends to arise almost universally from animal organs and by-products (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 28). Some theorists attribute this common factor to a fundamental unease with our own animal nature: as Miller remarks, 'It is not that animal bodies decay, excrete, suppurate, and die that makes these processes sources of disgust to us: it is that ours do' (1997: 49; quoted in Jones 2000). To express this feeling in words, to reveal our private discomfort to others and allow them to admit their own, does alleviate the pressures of polite behaviour. But it doesn't cure disgust or dispose us to accept our physicality, much less to celebrate the beauties and pleasures of the body.

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<sup>2</sup> The author was generally referred to as 'Mrs. Manley' in her day, and there has been much discussion about what her Christian name was, and how it is to be spelled: sometimes 'de la Riviere' or 'Delariviere'. Fidelis Morgan makes a good argument for dropping 'Mary' altogether, and for the spelling 'Delarivier' (14). Because material on 'Mrs. Manley' is so variously catalogued, I have kept 'Mary' but adopted Morgan's suggested spelling of her second name throughout the text. However, I use the spelling adopted by any authority cited where necessary.

With these warnings in mind, then, let us turn from the *Obvious Child* monologue to some lines written more than three centuries earlier, probably in the mid-1660's, about another young woman's dirty underwear — Rochester's mock pastoral love poem to 'Phyllis in foul linen' ('Song': 46, 1.16):

Fair nasty Nymph, be clean and kind,  
And all my joys restore;  
By using Paper still behind,  
And Spunges for before. ('Song': 45, ll. 5–8)<sup>3</sup>

The first time I read this poem, in college, I speculated that the earl had composed it in the Restoration version of junior high school. But I was quickly warned to view this unclean shepherdess, not as some real person, but merely as a trope intended to hasten the demise of the moribund Virgilian and Ovidian conventions that were still decorating the Cavalier lyrics of Rochester's older contemporaries; only one of many false idols that drew his satiric fire. His satires are what Rochester is known for today, probably in part because poems such as 'Upon Nothing' seemed to prefigure the existentialist world view of twentieth-century editors of anthologies. It therefore surprised me to learn, on first looking at his complete collected poems, that he also had a romantic side that must have been familiar to his contemporaries, for here are several completely unsatirical love lyrics, as full of Cynthias and Corinnas as any Cavalier or court lady could wish. Even Phyllis gets her share of polite adoration. No wonder in Aphra Behn's elegy upon his death he appears as the 'Swain' Strephon, whose selfless worship of women has led to his heroic death—at age 33, of syphilis: 'Mourn, all ye Beauties, put your *Cyprus* on, / The truest Swain that e're Ador'd you's gone' ('Late Earl of Rochester': 369).<sup>4</sup> She even decorates his tomb with some baroque Petrarchan Cupids in mourning, whose darts have become 'useless Toys', not because they have gone out of style, but because Strephon, who gave them power, has departed (Ibid: 369–70).

The satirist Rochester denied the romantic one: 'A song to Phyllis I perhaps might make, / But never rhymed but for my pintle's [i.e. penis's] sake' ('Satyr [Timon,]': 78, ll. 21–22). This disclaimer serves as a reminder that his Phyllises were not in fact mere tropes but real, numerous sex partners — 'ten thousand' if his own verses are to be believed ('The Imperfect Enjoyment': 31, l. 38). It also reminds us that this was war; even in Restoration comedy the happy ending could be achieved only through prolonged negotiation between the male party, who wanted sex

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<sup>3</sup> References to quotations from Rochester's poems follow the system: 'title of poem': page number(s), line number(s).

<sup>4</sup> References to quotations from Behn's poems follow the system: 'title of poem': page number(s), stanza number (if any) in capital roman numeral.



without commitment, and the female party, who for safety's sake required marriage. No wonder Petrarch's battle imagery still seemed relevant, from the woman's point of view. In Behn's sophisticated lyric 'Love Arm'd', the god Love still lingers in modern-day England only because the lovers in the poem have 'sett him up a Deity' ('Love Arm'd': 164). Furthermore, she gives new life to the old convention of courtly love by reversing the genders, so that the man, not the woman, is victorious and 'free' (Ibid: 164), and the woman, not the man, penetrated by the 'Killing dart':

From me he [Love] took his sighs and tears,  
From thee his Pride and Crueltie;  
From me his Languishments and Feares,  
And every Killing Dart from thee ('Love Arm'd': 164).

This 'dart of love' becomes even more literal, to the point of ludicrousness, in Rochester's 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', an adaptation of Ovid's poem about a failed erection:

This *Dart* of love, whose piercing point oft try'd,  
With Virgin blood, Ten thousand Maids has dy'd;  
Which Nature still directed with such Art,  
That it through ev'ry Cunt, reacht ev'ry Heart.  
[...]  
Now languid lies in this unhappy hour  
Shrunk up and sapless like a withered flower ('The Imperfect Enjoyment': 31, ll. 37–45).

Here he juxtaposes the Petrarchan metaphor with coarser Anglo-Saxon words as if in sheer boyish delight in making this fancy old figure do some hard, dirty work for a change. This is the voice of the frustrated male complaining, with humour, to an audience of other men. In contrast, when Behn adapted the same poem, the scene is presented, not by a participant, but by an omniscient narrator who offers up the pretty 'nymph' to the reader at the same time she offers herself, in vain, to her 'o'er-Ravish'd Shepherd' ('The Disappointment': 180, stanza VII).

Both poets' works make clear that women enjoy sex as much as men do. Why then can't we all just get along? A sort of answer is provided in Behn's 'The Golden Age', which describes an ancient pastoral utopia where 'a Thousand Cupids' ('The Golden Age': 141, stanza VI) once hovered over nymphs and swains making love in all innocence: 'The Nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain / Deny'd their Joyes, or gave the Lover pain' (Ibid: 141, stanza VI). But all this was spoiled by men's imperialist ambitions:

Right and Property were words since made,  
When Power taught Mankind to invade:  
When Pride and Avarice became a Trade:  
[...]  
And Rapes, Invasions, Tyrannies,  
Was gaining of a Glorious Name ('The Golden Age': 140, V).

Women became part of that ‘property’, protected on their owners’ behalf by ‘cursed Honour!’ and its attendant ‘shame’ (Ibid: 141, stanza VIII). As the partnership in love devolved into a power struggle, ‘Honour’ supplied women with the weapon of coquetry to wield in their own defence: ‘Honour! Who first taught lovely Eyes the art, / To wound, and not to cure the heart: / With Love to invite, but to forbid with Awe’ (Ibid: 142, stanza VIII). Coquetry, in its turn, begot the fashion industry, as elaborate clothes would now be needed to hide ‘all the Charmingst part of Beauty’ and expensive hair stylists to ‘[Gather] up the flowing Hair [...] / No more neglected on the Shoulders hurl’d; / Now drest to Tempt, not gratify the World’ (Ibid: 141, stanza VIII).

Implicit in ‘The Golden Age’ is the assumption that in nature, men’s and women’s bodies are beautiful in the same way; both ‘shame’ and gender difference are imposed from without. This resemblance is a basic feature of the pastoral aesthetic, as seen, for example in Honoré d’Urfé’s romance from around 1607, *L’Astrée* (1928) — a source for one of Behn’s nicknames, Astrea. Here shepherds and shepherdesses look so much alike that the hero, Celadon, can spend much of the narrative dressed as a woman and finally unmask himself by simply announcing his true sex, without even changing his outfit (d’Urfé 1928: 300). Behn’s other nickname, the English Sappho, also provides a classical tradition for an even further interchangeability of the sexes, as several of her love poems were addressed to female friends such as Lady Morland, Elizabeth Barry, and Emily Price, with whom she may or may not have had actual affairs (Duffy 1977: 128–29). One of these lyrics, ‘To the Fair Clarinda, who made love to me imagined more than woman’, argues that lesbian relationships are a sin-free alternative to heterosexual love:

In pity to our Sex sure thou wer’t sent,  
That we might Love, and yet be Innocent:  
For sure no Crime with thee we can commit;  
Or if we shou’d—thy Form excuses it (‘Fair Clarinda’).

Rochester also wrote homoerotic lyrics, but predictably in a very different style. Instead of both sexes resembling each other in beauty, here they compete with each other in avoidance of ugliness. In ‘Love a Woman, Y’Are an Ass’, he brags, ‘There’s a sweet soft Page of mine, / Does the trick worth Forty Wenches’ (‘Love a Woman’: 25, 15–16) — implying that at least this boy, unlike poor Phillis, doesn’t stink. Again, the extent to which homosexuality was a real lifestyle choice for Rochester rather than mere verbal bravado is unknown. We do know, however, that for Behn the vanished ideal of the Golden Age was more than a fantasy. She belonged to a mixed group of friends calling themselves the ‘cabal’ who really did cavort in the countryside dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses (Goreau 1980: 140; Woodcock 1989: 99).

An occasional participant in these picnics was her sometime lover, the lawyer John Hoyle, a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing whose lack of sustained interest in their affair may have been due to his preference for men (Goreau 1980: 189–206; Woodcock 1989: 105–118). One may easily imagine Hoyle as a middle-class Rochester wannabe whom Behn tried, and failed, to see as a libertine in manners with the heart of a Virgilian shepherd. The affair may well have led to her tragic end, since she too would die, in 1689, at age forty-nine, of syphilis — or as she might have said, of love (Goreau 1980: 216; Woodcock 1989: 193).

Behn's nickname 'Astrea' had as its ancient eponym the goddess of justice from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who leaves the earth at the end of the Golden Age. Not coincidentally, this Astrea figures prominently in *The New Atalantis* (1709), the best-selling novel by a woman writer of the next generation, Mary Delarivier Manley. By the turn of the eighteenth century a growing conservatism made it virtually impossible for a woman to publish anything without accusations of 'lewdness' (Todd 1998: 18 ff.), thus escalating the gender war and causing Manley to spend much of her professional life deflecting insults on her writings and character, which were treated as inseparable. Of course, the female poet did have a classical precedent, but since this was Sappho — a legendary victim of her own intense passions whose poetry had been almost completely destroyed by the Catholic Church centuries before — she wasn't much help to an eighteenth-century author's reputation. The only topic this ancient lyricist left open for her descendants was love, extensive knowledge of which could cast a shadow on the respectability of any woman from the seventh century BCE on downwards. Manley, who did consider herself a love expert, was fortunate to have a close working relationship with Jonathan Swift, who defended her against personal attacks by Whig writers such as Sir Richard Steele, and who thought her talented enough, for 'one of her sort', to make her editor of the Tory *Examiner* in 1710 (quoted in Zelinsky 1999: 12, 140). This move somewhat extended her field of expertise, though even her most political satires never strayed far from the expected feminine topic.

Swift, perhaps even more than Rochester, is known today for the scatological imagery with which his satires targeted not only his political enemies but also the conventions of courtly love that set women up as objects of worship. And so once again we find ourselves looking closely at a shepherdess's dirty underwear — for example in 'The Lady's Dressing-Room', where the contents of 'Celia's' commode:

Send up an excremental Smell  
To taint the Parts from whence they fell,  
[And] the Pettycoats and Gown perfume  
Which waft a Stink round every Room ('The Lady's Dressing Room': 91).

Unlike Rochester's libertine persona, Swift's is a neutral onlooker, impervious to Cupid's weaponry. In fact, he wields the powerful arrows of satire to rout Cupid and his darts from English poetry once and for all — literally. In 'Strephon and Chloe', as the bride reaches for the chamber pot on her wedding night, 'the little Cupids hov'ring round [...] / Abash'd at what they saw and heard / Flew off, nor ever more appear'd' ('Strephon and Chloe': 107). If only Strephon had '[s]py'd her on the privy' much earlier, the 'Idea' would have kept him safe from love, as the narrator himself claims to be ('your heart had been as whole as mine' [Ibid: 108]). In other words, a man's best defence against love — that is, against women — is disgust.

Manley earned Swift's respect with her own satires, though critics often dismissed these — even until quite recently (see Carnell 2006: 38) — as mere gossip. Her several *romans à clef* attacked many known figures associated with the Whigs; but they also criticised, in what John Richetti has called 'rhetorically swollen' and 'melodramatic' language, 'a world of blasted female innocence and brutal male lust' (1991). This 'swollen' rhetoric is the next generation of the language of Ovid, Virgil, and Petrarch we have seen used with contrasting attitudes in the poetry of Behn and Rochester. By Manley's time it had made its way into popular culture through the medium of seventeenth-century French romance and Restoration heroic drama. Manley herself often satirised this 'bombast' in her novels, as it was commonly used as a tool of seduction by male predators and then hastily abandoned after the act. In some episodes the seducer claims to have adopted heroic language merely 'to allow [the female's] Virtue that pretence for yielding', as if both parties were only play-acting (*New Atalantis* I: 240, repr. I: 512).<sup>5</sup> Yet for the unwitting victim this heightened discourse may have had an emotional truth, and her abandonment was likely to have consequences that would indeed be 'melodramatic' rather than tragic if the ruin of women's lives happened only on the stage. In Manley's novels the French romances that transmitted this idealised language of love to a wide, especially female, readership are blamed for making inexperienced girls — including her own younger self — vulnerable to the machinations of cynical libertines who, if they don't quite 'rhyme', at least declaim 'but for their pintles' sakes'. Reading these romances, as we learn in the autobiographical story of Delia in *The New Atalantis*, led to the young Manley's seduction into

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<sup>5</sup> The edition of Manley's works referred to in the Bibliography has a dual pagination system. As it is a facsimile edition, the pages retain the numbering of the original works; these start at 1 for each work. Each volume of the edition is also paginated, starting from 1 and continuing until the end; this is the 'reprint pagination', indicated by 'repr.' in the references. The references in the text give the page(s) according to both systems. In the Bibliography, the page ranges of each work are indicated by the reprint pagination, as the original pagination would be of no help. The two volumes of *The New Atalantis* are treated as one, but the page range is split between the two volumes of the original.

a bigamous marriage with her cousin John, though the world wrongly assumed she knew he was already married (*New Atalantis* II: 2.181–92, repr. I: 713–24). Fortunately, unlike most other women of the time, she had means to spin her resulting reputation for ‘lewdness’ into a profitable area of literary expertise.

In Manley’s novels, she fought back against the double-standard that made the ‘charters’ of each sex so unequal by creating imaginary worlds at least as complex and rich in ironic possibilities as *Gulliver’s Travels* (*Rivella*: 7, repr. II: 743). In *The New Atalantis* Astrea is returning to earth from the lunar sphere to consult the goddesses Intelligence and Virtue on the best way to educate the prince who will one day rule the moon. On this utopian planet, the goddess intends to create gender equality by imposing chastity on both sexes and punishing seducers with death (*New Atalantis* II: 192–93, repr. I: 724–25). Meanwhile, in *Atalantis*—which like Lilliput both is and is not England—Intelligence describes the romantic escapades of (mainly Whig) public figures, while Virtue and Astrea interpret these stories from a female point of view that validates women’s perceptions of male guilt.

Manley’s own seduction is one such story, which she later described at greater length in her fictionalised autobiography, *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714), again using an elaborate frame, this time filtering the story through the perspective of fictitious, sympathetic males. The narrator is Sir Charles Lovemore, who has long cherished an unrequited love for the heroine, and who has been asked by the young Chevalier D’Aumont, a fan of her writings, to tell him her history. The Chevalier is predisposed to fall in love with ‘Rivella’, coming from a society that values ‘Wit and Sense’ in women above ‘Youth or Beauty’; in other words, France as it is transformed here by the author’s romantic imagination into a utopia for women scorned by their own society (*Rivella*: 2, repr. II: 738). D’Aumont remarks: ‘If she have but half so much of the Practic, as the Theory, in the Way of Love, she must certainly be a most accomplish’d Person’ (*Rivella*: 4–5, repr. II: 740–41). When Lovemore warns that she ‘is no longer young, and was never a Beauty’, the Chevalier is undaunted, ‘provided her Mind and her Passions are not in Decay’ (*Rivella*: 5, repr. II: 741).

We learn from these characters’ conversation that Manley was chiefly famous for her erotic scenarios, though these could also have a satirical edge. In one of D’Aumont’s favourites, a duke seduces his ward, ‘the Young Charlot’, by getting her to read Ovid’s ‘romance’ between Myrrha and her father, which he thinks will arouse her passions. The scheme works, but not exactly in the way the Duke intended:

The young Charlot, who had [...] a strong propension of Affection for the duke, whom she call’d and esteem’d her *Papa* [...] wrought her Imagination up to such a lively height at the Fathers

Anger after the possession of his Daughter, which she judg'd highly unkind and unnatural, that she drop'd her Book, Tears fill'd her Eyes, Sobs rose to oppress her [...] (*New Atalantis* I: 63–64, repr. I: 335–36).

Her guardian takes advantage of her distress by moving in with 'pursuing Kisses. [...] Calling her his admirable Charlot! His charming Angel! His adorable Goddess!' (*New Atalantis* I: 64–65, repr. I: 336–37). Amidst all the ranting, Manley keeps the reader constantly aware of the lovers' bodies:

He prest her Lips with his, the nimble beatings of his Heart, apparently seen and felt thro' his open Breast! The glowing! The trembling of his Limbs! The glorious Sparkes from his guilty Eyes! His shortness of Breath. [...]. But the duke's pursuing Kisses overcame the very Thoughts of any thing, but that new and lazy Poison stealing to her Heart, and spreading swiftly and imperceptibly thro' all her Veins, she clos'd her Eyes with languishing Delight! Deliver'd up the possession of her Lips and Breath to the amorous Invader [...] and in a word, gave her whole Person into his Arms [...]! (*New Atalantis* I: 64–65, repr. I: 336–37).

Such scenes could raise her readers' temperatures, as D'Aumont claims; but they also manage to make the point that men and women have very different ways of reading Ovid.

The men and women in Manley's erotic stories, true to pastoral tradition, look so much alike as to be interchangeable — are in fact interchanged, as in these two passages from *The New Atalantis*:

Tuberoses set in pretty Gilt and China Posts, were placed advantageously upon Stands, . . . upon the Bed were strow'd with a lavish Profuseness, plenty of Orange and Lemon Flowers, and to compleat the Scene, the young Germanicus in a dress and posture not very decent to describe; it was he that was newly risen from the Bath, and in a loose Gown of Carnation Taffety, stain'd with Indian Figures, his beautiful long, flowing Hair, for then 'twas the Custom to wear their own tied back with a Ribbon of the same Colour, he had thrown himself upon the Bed, pretending to Sleep, with nothing on but his Shirt and Night-Gown, which he had so indecently dispos'd, that slumbring as he appear'd, his whole Person stood confess'd to the Eyes of the Amorous Dutchess, his Limbs were exactly form'd, his Skin shiningly white, [...] his Face turn'd on one side [...] was obscur'd by the Lace depending from the Pillows on which he rested (*New Atalantis* I: 33–34, repr. I: 305–06).

She had nothing on but her Night-Dress, one Petticoat, and a rich Silver stuff Night-Gown that hung carelessly about her. [...] She got into a shade of Orange Flowers and Jessamine, the Blossoms that were fallen cover'd all beneath with a profusion of Sweets. [...] Diana. . . threw herself under the pleasing Canopy [...] the dazling Lustre of her Bosom stood reveal'd, her polish'd Limbs all careless and extended [...] (*New Atalantis* II: 227–28, repr. I: 759–60).

The striking similarity of these descriptions, the equality of the gaze, may seem refreshing to readers of our own time, accustomed at least until recently to a more clearly gendered camera. But that equality in fiction was there to compensate for the lack of it in reality. Unlike Behn, who saw gender difference in love affairs as a sign of man's corruption of Nature, Manley believed nature made the sexes incompatible, causing females to cling at the precise post-coital moment when males experience an urge to flee: in other words, to 'take up their Fondness exactly where their Lover leaves it' (*New Atalantis* I: 229, repr. I: 501). So far advanced was the alienation of the sexes by this time that when Manley speaks of a 'cabal', it is not Behn's

mixed group of costumed shepherds and shepherdesses but strictly a sisterhood with no men allowed, whose members ‘reserve their Heart, their tender Amity for their Fair [female] Friend: an Article in this well-bred wilfully undistinguishing Age, which the Husband seems to be rarely solicitous of’ (*New Atalantis* II: 47, repr. I: 579). The only way she could envision heterosexual love that was anything but tragic for women was through erotic set pieces, such as those quoted above, as static and highly wrought as the paintings of Watteau.

Manley’s erotic scenes deftly bridge the gap between ideal beauty and ugly reality, as if to suggest optimistic possibilities for the beautification of the real. The insistence on fresh, floral fragrance in the above passages suggests its absence in the real sexual encounters a woman of Manley’s background might experience. Since many more middle-class women than men read French romances, these men might know nothing of style — or even foreplay — as an aspect of lovemaking, or have even considered bathing, like Germanicus, to make their own bodies more pleasing. Manley’s best-sellers could culturally educate her English male readers and improve the lives of the women associated with them; for, as Chevalier D’Aumont asks, ‘After perusing her *Inchanting Descriptions*, which of us have not gone in *Search of Raptures* which she everywhere tells us, as happy Mortals, we are capable of tasting?’ (*Rivella*: 4, repr. II: 740).

The ‘happy Mortals’ of *Atalantis* achieve these Raptures through shrewd management of the disgust reaction that, as modern theorists tell us, can so easily interfere with love and intimacy (see Miller 1997: 109–142). The savvy Lovemore and D’Aumont purposely cultivate a ‘well natur’d and civil’ attitude toward any possibly disgusting ‘defects’ in their prospective partners. They agree that ‘Red Hair, Out-Mouth, thin and livid Lips, black broken Teeth, coarse ugly Hands, long thumbs, ill form’d dirty Nails, flat, or very large Breasts, splay Feet’ might be daunting if they were all found in the same person, but spread out among several, they should ‘prove no Allay to the strongest Passions’, for a reasonable lover (*Rivella*: 9, repr. II: 745). Raptures are the reward of those who can focus on the positive, Disgust the punishment for those looking for airbrushed and photo-shopped perfection.

Unfortunately, even if Manley’s male readers had taken her hints about personal hygiene and a cheerful attitude, her world would have been far from a pastoral paradise. Lovemore and D’Aumont, though idealised beyond all believability, are still men discussing the problem of women’s bodies. And even if the pleasures of love could be shared equally by both partners, Manley everywhere insists that the costs of love were not. Today things would seem to be somewhat more just. Women may still be ‘slut-shamed’, but probably not for one mistake. Nor do today’s men need any lessons in the aesthetics of sex. That may in fact be one reason that

even in our freer world the voice of disgust is becoming louder rather than softer: all the ‘true Symmetry’ and ‘Perfections’ (*Rivella*: 9, repr. II: 745) we see on our various screens every day make it a challenge to be that ‘happy Mortal’ who can love imperfect bodies — our own or those of others. And as the poems of Rochester and Swift strongly hint, no one is more prone to disgust than the disappointed romantic.

Disgust can be salutary: it makes us laugh while reminding us not to pretend to be something we’re not. And Isaac Asimov may have been right to predict that the sharing of ‘dirty jokes’ can promote close friendship between men and women. We see this on the television series *Louie* (2010–present) in the relationship between Louis C.K. and poker buddy Sarah Silverman as they confront their own self-disgust, fears about ageing, what might more grandly be called existential nausea. Louie’s own preoccupation with incontinence has led to more than one monologue about his own soiled underwear.

Yet the limitations of this type of sharing appear in Louie’s perennial failures to find a relationship in which he can express a tender emotion without being sneered at. If love requires the suppression of disgust, then conversely, the persistence of disgust may signal a failure of love. Disgust may destroy false idols, but it does nothing to satisfy the desires that set up those idols in the first place. I don’t suggest we bring back the little baroque Cupids, which today not even Hallmark can reference without irony. But some antidote to disgust does seem to be sorely needed: some language for envisioning the body as a source of tangible beauty and attainable pleasure. Disgust is easy. The real challenge is happiness.

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## Nausea, ‘the seal of true love’? Günter Grass’ Many Uses of Disgust in *Die Blechtrommel*

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### Abstract

At the core of Günter Grass’ literary work lies a marked interest for elements normally thought of as unpleasant, vile, and nauseating. Part of the fascination of his books lies precisely in the possibility of observing the world from a different point of view, that is to say, from a crooked perspective which defies mainstream taste. *Die Blechtrommel* (first published in 1959) offers a good example of this tendency: Oskar’s decision to remain in a state of extended childhood can be associated with a Freudian reflection on the human psyche, more specifically with the idea of the child as ‘polymorphic pervert’, indifferent to or even fond of things which adults are bound to find disgusting. The use of the grotesque in Grass’ work is strictly linked to dietary elements, such as: the canned fish Oskar’s mother gulps down in order to kill herself, the insistence on entrails, the recurring use of figures of speech regarding food. Through Grass’ work, the idea of ‘disgust’ thus becomes a useful tool for investigating contemporary scenarios in the relationships humans establish with each other and with their history.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, disgust, food in literature.



The use of ‘disgust’ as a category in order to analyse a literary work may at first glance seem out of place. Nonetheless, this ‘strong sensation’ (Menninghaus 2003) is a fundamental constituent of our everyday life; it reveals a lot about our ways of being. Perhaps the most interesting thing in disgust lies in its illusory viscosity: it seems fully ‘natural’, because it springs out from the depths of our body. The impulse to vomit, the first and most striking reaction to repugnance, seemingly comes from our phylogenetic history, from ‘genuine’ tendencies inscribed in our flesh; and yet it marks our irreparable exclusion from the Eden of nature and animality. As far as we know, no other animal reacts to external stimuli by

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015. The author wishes to thank Harriet Clements for her careful editing of the article, in particular her invaluable thematic suggestions and stylistic corrections.

vomiting; when an animal vomits, it is not as a reaction to that abrupt sensation of loathing, that unavoidable desire to distance oneself from an object, a situation or an image, which we call disgust. The latter can be seen as a 'protective mechanism' helping us 'to ensure the safety of the organism by inhibiting contact with what is foul, toxic and thereby dangerous' (Korsmeyer & Smith 2004: 1); but this delimitation is too weak. A deep cultural component is also evident: for example, people of different groups are disgusted by different things. We find the most striking examples in the culinary area. Some things, which in one place are considered *Delikatessen*, elsewhere are taken for emetics; the flesh of some animals, like dogs and horses, is delicious to some people and revolting to others.

On the other hand, there are things which are universally considered disgusting, putrefaction, for example. Indeed, we could broadly say that the aversion arises from anything associated with decay and physical death. Furthermore, everything that comes directly from the body is disgusting, particularly anything smelling like rot from the body's interior: vomit, faeces, urine, secretions like saliva, sweat and mucus, blood (in particular menstrual fluid), and semen. Anything whose smell links it to putrefaction, such as offal and certain cheeses, can be added to this list, as can also whatever distantly recalls it, such swarms of worms, insects, spiders, snakes, and, finally, mice, perhaps because of our atavistic fear they could exhaust our food stockpiles or irreparably taint them. It's important to notice that these things were considered revolting even before science provided proof of the epidemiological danger related to them. This connection with decay is also likely to be the reason of the loathing caused by some kinds of ugliness and deformity, recalling the contortions of suffering and death.

Morality is another slippery and opaque field; here the cultural components play an even more important role. Carolyn Korsmeyer writes: 'often the language of disgust is applied to moral situations to indicate emphatic disapproval in a manner that is more metaphorical than literal' (2011: 4). A specific behaviour is equated via metaphor with something revolting, and, in turn, it becomes revolting. This 'metaphorical manner' is evident in the set of problems still connected with the sexual sphere: nudity, explicit sex scenes or homosexuality are typical contexts which, even today, create forms of 'moral disgust'. The body plays a central role here, with its secretions and its physicality. It's no coincidence that many political campaigns against homosexuality use arguments linked to the 'dangerous' exchange of physical fluids, ignoring the fact heterosexual intercourse is not free from this 'danger', as Martha Nussbaum observes in her chapter 'The Politics of Disgust: Practice, Theory, History' in which she discusses Paul Cameron's obsession with the disgusting in his published material on (principally male)

homosexuality (Nussbaum 2010: 1–30; chapter 1).<sup>2</sup> After all, the political fight against other races, ethnicities or groups is also often based on the possibilities of contagion of the ‘pure’ social body by the extraneous germs conveyed (or constituted!) by Jews, blacks, foreigners, and *Untermenschen* in general.

In the field of morality, abjection is often connected with taboo infringement; incest was considered disgusting by most cultures long before evidence of hereditary diseases and abnormalities was found. Disgust is certainly one medium by which taboos have been fixedly set in culture. To declare an object taboo – the totem animal, or the king, or the next of kin – means creating a *cordon sanitaire* that prevents anyone from getting close to it. It is not rooted in its actual and immediate dangerousness but in cultural and social reasons (see for example Wolf, Durham 2004). The most interesting thing here is the role played by the body: the prohibition connected with taboo has its roots in the body’s inner parts; disgust, with its immediate and visceral reactions, is one of the most effective mechanisms whereby to prevent individuals from trespassing the thresholds the taboo protects.

This brief and largely incomplete overview of the idea of disgust (see further Kolnai 1998, 2004; Menninghaus 1999; Korsmeyer 2011; Nussbaum 2004, 2010; McGinn 2011) can be useful as a basis for reflection on the novel *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*), published by Günter Grass in 1959 (Grass 1974, 1998).<sup>3</sup> Disgust plays a major role in the novel; nevertheless, critics have overlooked it, surely because of the overwhelming variety of narrative themes and images. It is a very interesting exercise, especially from an historical perspective. Many things were considered disgusting by his contemporaries at the time of its publication, especially its ‘pornographic’ moments, in respect of which legal action was taken against Grass (see Neuhaus 1997); today the same passages make us smile, when we compare them with the many ‘Shades of Grey’ (with acknowledgements to James (2011)) permeating, so they say, our present culture. All the same, many scenes in the novel remain ‘genuinely’ disgusting. In the pages that follow I shall reflect upon them, in order to analyse the way Grass uses this ‘strong sensation’ as a lens through which to view the world around Oskar Matzerath.

### 1. The unpleasant, vile and nauseating: Disgust in Grass’ work

At the core of Günter Grass’ literary work there lies a marked interest for elements normally thought of as unpleasant, vile, and nauseating. Part of his books’ fascination resides precisely

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<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum quotes the American Sociological Association as having written that ‘Dr. Cameron has consistently misinterpreted and misrepresented research on sexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism’ (Nussbaum 2010: 6).

<sup>3</sup> This work and its English translation will from now on be cited respectively ‘DB’ and ‘TTD’.

in the possibility of observing the world from a different point of view; that is to say, from a distorted perspective which defies mainstream *taste*. The protagonists of *The Tin Drum* and *Katz und Maus* (*Cat and Mouse*; Grass 1983, 1978b), Oskar and Mahlke, are physically misshapen; their contemporaries find this deformity slightly repelling, as do readers, and it operates as a filter, permitting them to see major malformations in the social body. In the novel *Der Butt* (*The Flounder* Grass 1977, 1978a), the ugliness of the flounder, embodied in its crooked mouth, serves to overturn the traditional perspective and to shed doubt on progress and the force leading it, be that force God or the Hegelian ‘*Weltgeist*’, as positive elements in the human history. The first person narrator of the novel has a predilection for foods often thought of as revolting, like tripe and other offal. On the one hand, this conforms to the image of blustering virility adopted as a counter to the ‘Feminal’, the feminist tribunal which puts the flounder on trial; on the other, it seems a wholesome form of nonconformity, a refusal to comply with fashionable trends of fast-food or vegetarianism.

There are, then, more meals, subtly differentiated, that are revolting in Grass’ work. The children in Oskar’s court compel him to gulp down a horrid concoction, in a scene with ironic Faustian undertones, as we will see later on. He feels obliged to eat the repulsive spaghetti offered by Klepp; this act, although revolting, marks the beginning of a friendship which enables him to overcome his disgust. In the novel *Hundejahre* (*The Dog Years*), Tulla shares meat and offal with the German Shepherd dog Harras during the seven days she spends in its kennel after her brother Konrad’s death (Grass 1963: 177–87; 1969: 198–209). This genuine lack of fussiness is characteristic of the girl’s vitality. An example is given by the unforgettable scene of *Katz und Maus* when Tulla plays around with the semen expelled by the boys on the minesweeper:

Als das Zeug endlich kam und auf den Rost klatschte, begann sie erst richtig zappelig zu werden, warf sich auf den Bauch, machte enge Rattenaugen, guckte guckte, wollte ichweißnichtwas entdecken, hockte wieder, ging auf die Knie, stand leicht x-beinig darüber und begann mit beweglichen großen Zeh zu rühren, bis es rostrot schäumte: ‘Mensch, prima! Mach du jetzt mal, Atze!’ (Grass 1983: 26)

[*But when, finally, the stuff came and splashed on the rust, she would begin to fidget and squirm, she would throw herself down on her belly, make little rat's eyes and look and look, trying to discover heaven-knows-what, turn over, sit up, rise to her knees and her feet, stand slightly knock-kneed over the mess, and begin to stir it with a supple big toe, until it foamed rust-red: "Boy! That's the berries! Now you do it, Atze."* (Grass 1978a: 29)]

Although not being misshapen, the narrator plays with her typical ugliness: Tulla is ‘ein Spirkel mit Strichbeinen [*a spindly little thing with legs like toothpicks*]’ and her face can be drawn ‘mit einem Punkt Komma Strich [*with the most common punctuation marks*]’ (Grass 1983: 25; 1978b: 29). She arouses her mate’s interest only because of her sexual availability;

in this way, she put herself in the zone of the ‘morally contentious’ and ‘disgusting’, for her milieu. Both Tulla and Oskar demonstrate a deep lack of interest in the people surrounding them, a particular form of amorality found in many of Grass’ characters; Tulla, for example, remains the same in the novella *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*) (Grass 2002a; 2002b), with her beliefs, at the same time firm and inconsistent.

Disgust also plays, albeit less obviously, an important role in *Im Krebsgang*. Again, it is an intellectual or moral disgust, rather than disgust for something seen, tasted or felt; another example of this is to be found in *Die Blechtrommel*, as shall be seen. Tulla’s nostalgic reminiscences about particular aspects of her childhood and years as a teenager in Nazi Danzig with which she regales Konrad, her grandson, arouses his curiosity, with the result that he becomes radicalised by the ethos of the Neo-Nazis. Throughout the novella, it has become increasingly clear, although never expressly stated, that Paul, Konrad’s father and Tulla’s son, finds the ethos of the Neo-Nazis abhorrent; indeed, the moment when Paul realises that his son embraces those very political views that he, Paul, finds repellent is arguably the novella’s *Wendepunkt* (Grass 2002a: 73; 2002b: 75). However, the irresolute Paul, who embodies the fragility of post-war West German society, is unable to transform this disgust into a source of positive values for Konrad.

We can add here another category of moral disgust, linked to all behaviours violating the elementary norms of inter-human partnership. Tulla and Oskar have kin, to be found in world literature: Characters like Fedor, one of the eponymous brothers in Dostoevsky’s 1882 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, who is not a sadist but totally indifferent toward his peers (2002), Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in Süskind’s novel *Das Parfum* (1985), or Patrick Bateman in Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991). More than cruelty or reprehensible behaviours, what is repugnant and contemptible in them is their self-exclusion from society and from its rituals of compromise. This doesn’t come from some kind of higher law but is simply the consequence of an enormous self-centeredness which inhibits every form of empathy with other human beings. This is an important starting point from which to analyse *The Tin Drum*. As a first person narrator, the completely self-centred Oskar drives the ways of reading the novel. It begins from the very first line, with the dwarf playing with his own unreliability: ‘Zugegeben: ich bin Insasse einer Heil- und Pflegeanstalt [*Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital*]’ (*DB*: 9; *TTD*: 1). Grass’ narrator immediately lets the reader know that the whole narration is filtered through his eyes, the eyes of a man whose mental illness is at least alleged; on more than one occasion he confesses he is ‘unreliable, vacillating, untruthful, and a teller of fantastic,

largely unsubstantiated events' (Beyersdorf 1980: 138; see also Arker 1989: 101–03; Jahnke/Lindemann 1993: 9–18; Robertson 1996: 64–70). Grass plays with these possibilities. typical of the picaresque novel: whoever lives by means of expediency and fraud can't be seen as trustworthy when he narrates his life. Oskar's perspective has, furthermore, a spatial characteristic: a dwarf can only see the world from a bottom-up perspective. The subsequent deformation of the ordinary vision line affects the reader, too; this major tool permits a radical *Verfremdung*.

This defamiliarisation is made more acute by the way Oskar troubles those around him by choosing, at the age of three, to stop growing and let his family think that he suffers from intellectual inadequacy. One of the main reasons for this choice is his determination to behave solely according to his own desires without any consideration for those of other people. In this way, the dwarf avoids all responsibility as regards the world around him, a trait Oskar shares with many of Grass' other male characters, such as the first person narrators of *The Flounder* and *Crabwalk* both of whom, just like the dwarf, desire 'die Rückkehr zur Nabelschnur [*to get back to the umbilical cord*]' (DB: 144; TTD: 163). While the adult narrators must ceaselessly make compromises with the women, and the reality, surrounding them, Oskar places himself in radical opposition to the adults and their ability for mutual adaptation; he uses his decision to remain a child, not conforming to the norms of 'civilization' in order to maintain his uncanny distance from the events he recounts. The reader never understands either his basic assumptions or the extent to which he is involved in the suffering around him, suffering such as the many deaths — of Agnes, his mother, Matzerath and Bronski, his two fathers, Roswitha, and Sister Dorothea —, or if he really suffers from these losses at all.

It is important to highlight that this is not a protest in the name of the slogan, which was to become the mainstream slogan of student movements some years later, 'Väter sind Täter [*fathers are perpetrators*]'. Nor is it the decision to remain innocent and untouched by the Nazi atmosphere. Oskar goes against the adult society's norms only because of his limitless egotism. This radical opposition is added to another form of rejection, even subtler and more uncanny, of life in general. Indeed, he appears to be frightened by life. His attempts to kill the child growing in Maria's womb, supposedly his brother, but who may in fact be his son, are obviously driven by jealousy, but he chooses remarkably interesting words when he says: '[Ich] verließ [...] unser Wohnzimmer, das mir angesichts eines raumfüllenden Leibes zu eng geworden war [[I] left our living room, which in view of that space-filling abdomen had become too small for me]' (DB: 245; TTD: 280). Behind Grass' narration lies a sort of anguish before this 'double

bind' situation: on the one hand, a painful consciousness associated with the adult world and, on the other, a horrifying and indifferent nature, a bare life. The unstable solution appears to be the closest thing possible to the nirvanic refuge of the maternal womb.

## 2. Disgust in *The Tin Drum*: eels, vomit and corpses

*The Tin Drum* has never been the object of an extensive analysis with psychoanalytical tools. Freudian elements are probably far too evident and openly declared to consecrate specific studies to them. Oskar has, for example, a manifest Oedipal complex, redoubled by the presence of two father-rivals, Matzerath and Bronski. Incidentally, he is successful in killing them both, though not in marrying his mother Agnes, one of the most sensitive and human characters invented by Grass; nevertheless, he finds a substitute for her in Alfred's second wife, Maria. His decision to continue to live in a state of extended childhood is a clear form of regression. Moreover, there are plenty of phallic items in the novel, summed up by Oskar's 'new found friend' Gottfried von Villar close to the end of the novel: 'Trommelstock, Narbe, Patronenhülse, Ringfinger [*drumstick, scar, cartridge case, ring finger*]' (DB: 474; TTD: 544). These are 'objective correlatives' (Neuhaus 2010: 73) recalling the sticks of Oskar's drum, the scars on Herbert Truczinski's back, the cartridge case connected with Jan Bronski's death, and sister Dorothea's ring finger, which Oskar claims to have in his possession. The same friend goes on to note: 'ein aufgeschlossener Mensch [müßte] die Folge [...] mühelos begreifen [*A man of discernment could not fail to see through [this] sequence*]' (DB: 474; TTD: 544). Although not cited, other obvious phallic references include his 'eleventh finger' (DB: 229; TTD: 261) and little Jesus' 'watering can' (DB: 114; TTD: 126). The same can be said for the eels of the most famous, and perhaps the most disgusting, episode in the novel. Given its importance to the work, it is worth looking more closely at the scene.

On Good Friday, Oskar and his 'holy family' (TTD: 132)<sup>4</sup> that is, his parents and Jan Bronski, his mother's cousin and lover, and quite possibly Oskar's father, take a trip to the Baltic seaside. Here they meet an old longshoreman fishing for eels with a horse's head: 'ein[] Pferdekopf, ein[] frische[r], wie echte[r] Pferdekopf [...], faul war der Kopf nicht, stank nicht [*A fresh and genuine horse's head [...]. The head was not putrid, it didn't stink*]' (DB: 120; TTD: 134). 'Small light-green eels' dart furiously from it.

Es gelang dem Stauer [...] vielleicht zwei Dutzend kleinere Aale in den Sack zu stopfen, den Matzerath hilfsbereit, wie er sich gerne gab, hielt. So konnte er auch nicht sehen, daß Mama käsig im Gesicht wurde [...]. Aber als die kleinen und mittleren Aale im Sack waren und der

<sup>4</sup> Although very funny and perfectly appropriate, there is no trace of this religious allusion in the original German version.



Stauer [...] anfang, dickere, dunkle Aale aus dem Kadaver zu würgen, da mußte Mama sich setzen, und Jan wollte ihr den Kopf weg drehen, aber das ließ sie nicht zu, startete unentwegt mit dicken Kuhaugen mitten hinein in das Würmerziehen des Stauers. [...] [Er] riß, mit dem Wasserstiefel nahchelfend, dem Gaul das Maul auf, zwängte einen Knüppel zwischen die Kiefer, so daß der Eindruck entstand: das vollständige gelbe Pferdegebiß lacht. Und als der Stauer [...] mit beiden Händen hineingriff in den Rachen des Gaules und gleich zwei auf einmal herausholte, die mindestens armdick waren und armlang, da riß es auch meiner Mama das Gebiß auseinander; das ganze Frühstück warf sie, klumpiges Eiweiß und Fäden ziehendes Eigelb zwischen Weißbrotklumpen im Milchkaffeeguß über die Molensteine, und würgte immer noch, aber es kam nichts mehr. [...] Nichts außer grünlichem Schleim kam – und die Möwen kamen. Kamen schon, als sie anfang zu spucken, kreisten tiefer, ließen sich fett und glatt fallen, schlugen sich um das Frühstück meiner Mama [...]. Als der Stauer fast fertig war und zum Abschluß dem Gaul einen mächtigen Aal aus dem Ohr zog, mit dem Aal die ganze weiße Grütze aus dem Hirn des Gaules sabbern ließ, da stand zwar gleichfalls dem Matzerath der Käse im Gesicht, aber die Angeberei gab er dennoch nicht auf [...] (DB: 122–23).

*[The longshoreman [...] managed to cram a couple of dozen small eels into the sack which Matzerath, who liked to be helpful, held ready for him. Matzerath was too busy to see Mama turn green. [...] But when the small and the medium-sized eels were in the sack and the longshoreman [...] began to squeeze thicker, dark colored eels out of the cadaver, Mama had to sit down. Jan tried to turn her head away, but Mama would not allow it; she kept staring with great cow's eyes into the very middle of the longshoreman's activity. [...] With the help of his rubber boot he wrenched the horse's mouth open and forced a club between the jaws, so that the great yellow horse teeth seemed to be laughing. And when the longshoreman [...] reached both hands into the horse's gullet and pulled out two at once, both of them as thick and long as a man's arm, my mother's jaws were also torn asunder: she disgorged her whole breakfast, pouring out lumpy egg white and threads of egg yolk mingled with lumps of bread soaked in café au lait over the stones of the breakwater. After that she retched but there was nothing more to come out. [...] Nothing came but green mucus, but the gulls came. They were already in their way when she began to vomit, they circled lower, they dropped down sleek and smooth; [...] they fought over my Mama's breakfast. [...] When in conclusion [the longshoreman] extracted an enormous eel from the horse's ear, followed by a mess of white porridge from the horse's brain, Matzerath himself was green about the gills but went right on with his act (TTD: 135–36).*

This passage is particularly complicated, as the disgust which it engenders emerges from different complementary elements, which Grass has cleverly intertwined. We have some clearly disgusting factors, like the decaying horse carrion, Agnes' vomit, the 'white porridge of the horse's brain', the 'long, viscous train of tobacco juice' spat by the longshoreman (DB: 120; TTD: 133), his rummaging in the horse's head; moreover, Grass uses some *Verfremdungseffekte* in order to make the sensation of disgust sharper. What is essential here is the way the atmosphere abruptly changes as the family's enjoyment of an idyllic Good Friday turns to revulsion at the repugnant sight. The reader is forced to share the feelings of Agnes and Jan, while the attitude of the others acts a prism, intensifying the discomfort engendered by the spectacle. One's first impression of the longshoreman is that of someone who's lazy and apparently good natured. In stark contrast, the phlegmatic way in which he fishes for eels with the horse's head gives him the gloss of something evil and, above all, inhuman; it is hard to discern an equal, another human being, in someone who does not appear to share our disgust for something. Matzerath wants to appear unmoved, but he wavers when confronted with the longshoreman's *crescendo* of actions, while Oskar maintains his usual nonchalance. In the

background we have the animals, the seagulls and the eels, which are ‘naturally’ unemotional but nevertheless no less uncanny in their attraction for disgusting elements, like the horse’s carrion, Agnes’ vomit and the sputum of the longshoreman.

On another level, there is an implicit reference in this construction of disgust to one of culture’s most evident boundaries, a self-deception which allows us to feed ourselves: the faculty to forget whence comes the food we eat, particularly animal meat, which is so like human flesh. Culinary preparations, as Lévi-Strauss frequently observes throughout his work (1970), are also ways to conceal the origin of foods, to distance ourselves from the idea of being similar to the other animals. Matzerath and the longshoreman talk, for example, about the rather cruel method used to prepare eels before smoking them: they wriggle themselves to death in the salt, and the salt draws the slime from their skin and innards. This practice is forbidden by the police, but the longshoreman believes there is no alternative: ‘Wie sollte man sonst auch den Schleim ohne Salz von den Aalen herunter und von innen heraus bekommen [*How else are you going to get the slime out of your eels?*]’ (DB: 122; TTD: 136). Eels and seagulls have the same appetites as human beings, but the latter found refined ways with which to satisfy them, ways which definitely separate mankind from the rest of the animal world. Disgust, *en passant*, functions as a signal we give each other, in order to note our distance from animality.

Later on, the longshoreman makes an even more surprising comment about the eels: ‘Und in menschliche Leiche gehen sie auch [...]. Besonders nach der Seeschlacht am Skagerrak sollen die Aale mächtig fett gewesen sein [*And [they crawl] into human corpses, too [...] They say the eels were mighty fat after the battle of the Skagerrak*]’ (DB: 122; TTD: 137). The reference to cannibalism, although through a third party, adds another repugnant element to the scene, touching upon one more taboo (see Eckhardt 1999). Even more interesting is the reference to the war, which unexpectedly broadens the perspective. What disgusts us is not only, or not principally, the natural circumstance of eels devouring corpses nor the fact that these eels could then be eaten by human beings but also the fact that the longshoreman appears not to consider the totally unnatural circumstance of war, with all its carnage and suffering, abnormal and disgusting.

The narrative thread of disgust continues. Matzerath, who is a passionate cook, buys some eels and wants to prepare them for lunch. His wife refuses to eat them, saying: ‘Überhaupt kein Fisch eß ich mehr, und Aale schon ganz und gar nicht [*I’ll never touch fish again as long as I live and certainly not an eel*]’ (DB: 123; TTD: 138). There follows a funny scene, in which Matzerath, who is a good-natured man and very kind to his wife, asks Jan to calm Oskar’s

mother, who is lying on the chaise-longue, and Jan does the job with much whispering ‘auf kaschubisch’ [*in Kashubian*] and hands under her skirt;<sup>5</sup> hidden in the cupboard, Oskar watches the scene. Everything seems to end well with a game of Skat, but some weeks later the mother, ‘von rätselhaftem Willen besessen [*possessed by some mysterious demon*]’ (DB: 129; TTD: 144), begins to devour enormous quantities of fish. It is not her husband who forces her to start eating fish again; in fact, he is sincerely worried about her behaviour.

[S]ie begann mit Ölsardinen zum Frühstück, fiel zwei Stunden später [...] über das Sperrholzkästchen mit den Bohnsacker Sprotten her, verlangte zum Mittagessen gebratene Flundern oder Pomuchel in Senfsoße, hatte am Nachmittag schon wieder den Büchsenöffner in der Hand: Aal in Gelee, Rollmöpfe, Bratheringe, und wenn Matzerath sich weigerte, zum Abendbrot wieder Fisch zu braten oder zu kochen, dann verlor sie kein Wort, schimpfte nicht, stand ruhig vom Tisch auf und kam mit einem Stück geräucherten Aal aus dem Laden zurück, daß uns der Appetit verging, weil sie mit dem Messer der Aalhaut innen und außen das letzte Fett abschabte, und überhaupt nur noch Fisch mit dem Messer aß. Tagsüber mußte sie sich mehrmals übergeben. [...] [Mama] führte den Aal durch die Maibutter und aß unentwegt, als hätte sie eine Fleißaufgabe zu erfüllen. [...] Wenige Tage später sah ich, wie sie in der Küche nicht nur über die gewohnten, verdammten Ölsardinen herfiel, sie goß auch das Öl aus mehreren älteren Dosen, die sie aufbewahrt hatte, in eine kleine Soßenpfanne, erhitzte die Brühe über die Gasflamme und trank davon [...]. Noch am selben Abend mußte Mama in die städtischen Krankenanstalten eingeliefert werden. [...] Es sollte sich herausstellen, daß Mama weder die Mole noch den Pferdekopf vergessen hatte, daß die Erinnerung an den Gaul [...] mit sich nahm. Ihre Organe erinnerten sich schmerzhaft überdeutlich an den Karfreitagsspaziergang und ließen, aus Angst von Wiederholung des Spazierganges, meine Mama, die mit ihren Organen einer Meinung war, sterben (DB: 129–30).

[She started in at breakfast on canned sardines, two hours later [...] she would dig into a case of Bohnsack sprats, for lunch she would demand fired flounder or codfish with mustard sauce, and in the afternoon there she was again with her can opener: eels in jelly, rollmops, baked herring, and if Matzerath refused to fry or boil more fish for supper, she would waste no breath in arguing, but would quietly leave the table and come back from the shop with a chunk of smoked eel. For the rest of us it was the end of our appetites, because she would scrape the last particle of fat from the inside and outside of the eel’s skin with a knife [...]. She would have to vomit at intervals throughout the day. [...] Mama [pushed] the potatoes aside, pulled out an eel through the sauce, and set to with relentless determination. [...] A few days later, I saw her in the kitchen as she [...] poured out the oil from several cans she had been saving up into a little saucepan, heated it over the gas, and drank it down [...] The same evening Mama was taken to the city hospital. [...] It soon turned out that Mama had forgotten neither the breakwater nor the horse’s head, that she had carried the memory of that horse [...] along with her. Every organ in her body stored up the bitter memory of that Good Friday excursion and for fear to be repeated, her organs saw to it that my mama, who was quite in agreement with them, should die (TTD: 144–46).]

Eating fish is clearly her way of committing suicide. The final part of the quotation supports our hypothesis of Freudian echoes in the novel; she suffers from a compulsion to repeat. The eel episode is a kind of trauma for Agnes, something difficult for her to articulate (i.e. to digest), and it is very interesting that Grass chooses such a visceral complex of images with which to talk about her death. The aversive effect provoked by the horse’s head has its counterpart in the

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<sup>5</sup> Both Agnes and her cousin are Kashubs, an ethnic group still found in parts of Poland with its own language; in fact Günter Grass’ mother was of Kashubian-Polish origin. The implication is that, by whispering in Kashub, they will not be understood by Matzerath.

way Agnes decides to kill herself: she turns disgust into a self-poisoning effect, and she uses her slight eating disorder, cited by Oskar during the eel episode (*DB*: 121; *TTD*: 135), as a weapon against herself, destroying at the same time her ‘schlanke[] Seele’ and her ‘üppigen Körper [*slender soul and ample body*]’ (*DB*: 173; *TTD*: 195).

We don’t exactly know what her reasons are for committing suicide, or where exactly her despair lies. She has a complicated relationship with a husband and a lover, and she is pregnant again, too. However, this situation is not, at this first glance, even remotely desperate; as Oscar recounts it, the three have reached quite an enviable balance. Maybe the mother’s failed happiness lies, on the one hand, in her fears about her new pregnancy; it is clear that the dwarf is a thorn in the flesh for his mother. On the other hand, it may lie in the inadequacy of the men around her. Jan’s melancholic, slightly effeminate delicacy, which harmonises with Agnes’ personality, clashes with Matzerath’s good-natured and jovial virility, which is likely to satisfy the woman’s other needs. It’s interesting to notice that, apart from the woman’s death, what harms the friendship between the two men is Hitlerian nationalism, which finally makes the friendship impossible (see *DB*: 172; *TTD*: 196). Something similar happens to Meyn, the trumpet player living in Oskar’s apartment block, who is nice until the moment he joins the SA. Nazism in the novel is seen as a distortion of civilization, corrupting human relationships on the basis of non-values like nation, race, and orderliness. When Meyn is drunk, he plays the trumpet marvellously and lives, with four stinking cats, in insanitary conditions. The SA-uniform forces him to remain sober, to stop playing and to kill the cats, whose bad smell he suddenly finds intolerable. Oskar narrates this cruel episode in the chapter ‘Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe [*Faith, Hope, Love*]’ (*DB*: 159–68; *TTD*: 181–90), and describes it in parallel with *Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass, in an intense and defamiliarising way.

One cannot but find the words Matzerath uses in the face of his wife’s desperation extremely moving: ‘Warum willst du das Kind denn nicht? Is ja gleich, von wem es is [*Why don’t you want the child? What does it matter whose it is?*]’ (*DB*: 129; *TTD*: 144). This character is drawn in such a way as to give the impression that Matzerath is a nice person. In no way can he be considered a victim; he is a quiet man, who likes to laugh, to sing, and to cook. His lack of jealousy as regards Agnes and her cousin stems from neither indifference nor a lack of tenderness towards his wife; indeed, the very opposite is true. He feels a great tenderness toward Oskar, despite the distance from both him and the world that the dwarf stubbornly maintains, and resists the idea of sending his son into a centre for euthanasia with rage (*DB*: 298; *TTD*: 342–43). And yet Matzerath joins the Nazis early on, and appears to be an enthusiastic supporter

of the movement, a ‘Mitläufer’, although, as far as we know, he doesn’t play an active role in inflicting violence against Jews (for example, during the Night of Broken Glass). During the eel episode, Oskar tells us that his entry into the party corresponds with ‘the way he was’:

Aber das war so seine Angewohnheit, immer zu winken, wenn andere winkten, immer zu schreien, zu lachen und zu klatschen, wenn andere schrien, lachten oder klatschten. Deshalb ist er verhältnismäßig früh in die Partei eingetreten, als das noch gar nicht nötig war, nichts einbrachte und nur seine Sonntagsvormittage beanspruchte (DB: 122–23).

[*He always had to wave when other people were waving, to shout, laugh and clap when other people were shouting, laughing and clapping. That explains why he joined the party at a relatively early date, when it was quite unnecessary, brought no benefits, and just wasted his Sunday mornings (TTD: 137).*]

He is an average man, a product of the petty bourgeoisie. The sympathy he arouses might be the most revolting thing in the novel, because it reminds the reader that Nazis were mostly very ‘normal’ people.

### 3. Fetishes and complexes: Oskar on the psychoanalyst’s couch

To return to psychoanalysis, it is evident that the narrative is built around many elements which represent the maternal uterus. The first symbol is surely Oskar’s grandmother’s ‘weiter Rock [wide skirt]’ (DB: 9; TTD: 1), where his grandfather Koljaiczek takes shelter at the beginning of the story, and where, with its ‘Geruch jener gelblich zerfließenden, leicht ranzigen Butter [smell of melted yellow, slightly rancid butter]’, Oskar finds lodging many times, as he recalls more than once (DB: 136, 272, 289; TTD: 153, 312, 331). Also cupboards play a role as symbols: as already mentioned, for example, Oskar takes refuge, in Danzig, in his parents’ bedroom wardrobe during the argument immediately after the episode with the eels (DB: 125–28; TTD: 140–44). This is an interesting passage because the narrative is interrupted by a dreamlike episode, where some themes of the novel resurface, for example Oskar’s passion for nurses, who, as caregivers, are clearly substitutes for his mother (see Neuhaus 2010: 75). On the other hand, other themes are evoked here for the first time, for instance the Black Witch, or, in the original German, the ‘schwarze Köchin [the black [female] cook]’, who embodies all of Oskar’s fears.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The name in the original German version recalls an enigmatic German nursery rhyme: ‘Ist die schwarze Köchin da? / Nein, nein, nein! / Dreimal muss ich 'rummarschier'n, / das viertemal den Kopf verlier'n./ das fünftemal: komm mit! / Ist die schwarze Köchin da? / Ja, ja, ja. / Da geht sie ja, da steht sie ja, / die Köchin aus Amerika! [Is the black cook here? / No, no, no! / Three times have I to march around / the fourth to lose the head / the fifth: now is your turn! Is the black cook here? / Yes, yes, yes! / She goes indeed, she stands indeed, the cook who comes from Tweed!]' (see Craig 2016). By translating ‘die schwarze Köchin’ as ‘the Black Witch’, Ralph Mannheim actually loses an important image, for cooking is very important in Grass’ work (see Neuhaus, Weyer, 2007; Schneider 2008).

Some years later, in Düsseldorf, Oskar enters another cupboard, this time in the room occupied by Sister Dorothea, who lives next door to him and who at that moment is away. He has never seen her, but his interest in nurses makes her, in any case, interesting. Oskar furtively enters the room while she is at work, and, after snooping around, he enters the cupboard. Here his goals are even more evident: his entering the cupboard is a sort of penetration, a fetishistic attempt to take the unknown nurse sexually, and, at the same time, a fulfilment of the desire to be contained in a space narrower than the real world, in a womb. In the dark, Oskar relives the episode of the eels, of which he's reminded by, not insignificantly, another item with phallic connotations, a black leather belt hanging in the cupboard (*DB*: 410–13; *TTD*: 470–73). This is a sort of re-enactment of the trauma, re-narrated with many details, not just a remembering.

Some observations by Winfried Menninghaus could be profitably used in this line of reasoning. Freud shows, suggests Menninghaus in a chapter in his work *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (2003), considerable interest in themes linked to disgust, as he, Menninghaus, understands it. Menninghaus stresses the evident pleasure the psychoanalyst took in imagining the early childhood as a paradisiacal condition devoid of disgust barriers, with their civilising and neuroticising function. The Freudian idea of the child as 'polymorphously perverse', indifferent to or even fond of things which adults are bound to find disgusting, is for our reasoning particularly important. In the *Introductory Lessons on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud highlights the way a child's sexuality differs from 'normal', that is, adult, sexuality; among other things, disgust plays a central role.

Was wir im Leben der Erwachsenen "pervers" nennen, weicht vom Normalen in folgenden Stücken ab: erstens durch das Hinwegsetzen über die Artschranke (die Kluft zwischen Mensch und Tier), zweitens durch die Überschreitung der Ekelschranke, drittens der Inzestschranke [...], viertens der Gleichgeschlechtlichkeit, und fünftens durch die Übertragung der Genitalrolle an andere Organe und Körperstellen. Alle diese Schranken bestehen nicht von Anfang an, sondern werden erst allmählich im Laufe der Entwicklung und der Erziehung aufgebaut. Das kleine Kind ist frei von ihnen (Freud 1969: 213).

[*What in adult life is described as "perverse" differs from the normal in these respects: first, by disregarding the barrier of species (the gulf between men and animals); secondly, by overstepping the barrier of disgust; thirdly, by overstepping the barrier of incest (the prohibition against seeking sexual satisfaction from near blood-relations); fourthly, by disregarding the prohibition against sexual intercourse with members of one's own sex; and, fifthly, by transferring the part played by the genitals to other organs and areas of the body. None of these barriers exist from the beginning; they were only gradually erected in the course of development and education. Small children are free of them* (Freud 1965: 209).]

Oskar's character is surely a very plastic representation of the 'polymorphously perverse' child and, above all, a depiction of the adult who wishes these barriers had never been built. This complex is evidenced by his fetishism (see the episode of Sister Dorothea's cupboard), his homoerotic tendencies, for example when confronted with Little Jesus' 'Gießkännchen

[*watering can*]' (DB: 114; TTD: 126), his perspective that transcends every issue regarding sexual morality, his incestuous desires, and his particular relation with the 'disgust-barriers'.

Although his narrative always appears emotionally disengaged, the dwarf does sometimes feel repugnance. The first example of this is the episode of the horrid 'soup' the children 'cook' while playing in the courtyard of the block of flats in which Oskar and his family live. They force Oskar to gulp down the brew, which contains three shots of a neighbour's tobacco juice laden spittle, two frogs, a pulverized brick, and the urine of various children. Oskar throws up the soup immediately, 'der Geschmack wird mir bleiben [*the taste will stay with me*]', he says, and the episode makes him feel 'den Drang nach einer Tat [*an urge for action*]' which broadens his glass-destroying horizons and increases his desire to leave the courtyard 'that had grown too small' and its soup-cookers (DB: 78; TTD: 84). For the first time in the novel, disgust has a gnoseological function.

In a similar vein, a comment made by Oskar is particularly pertinent: when talking about the school and about Schefflers' living room, he says they are 'kaum nach [s]einem Geschmack [*hardly to [his] liking*]' (DB: 74).<sup>7</sup> The cosmopolitan dwarf feels nothing but disgust for '[der] [Schefflers] süß-niedlichen, entzückend gemütlich [...] Behausung [*the [Scheffler residence] [that]] was too sweet for words, so cunning and coy*]' (DB: 70; TTD: 74);<sup>8</sup> with its abundance of knickknacks and embroidery, it perfectly embodies the petit bourgeois taste and ideals that his mother also shares (see DB: 34; TTD: 31). The only difference between the two women, as the dwarf cynically observes, is that Agnes can count on Jan Bronski as a diversion, whereas Gretchen Scheffler has to content herself by knitting; she sublimates by indefatigable housekeeping the need occasioned by her husband's lack of attention and the lack of children. However, the realm of repressed eroticism is revealed through Oskar's choice of *Rasputin and the Women*, a book that is rich in detailed descriptions of the self-styled holy man's complicated love-life, as the principal book from which to learn his ABC. Repression is further illustrated not only by Gretchen's embarrassed titter as they are reading the more explicit passages but also by her practice of plying Oskar with goodies from her husband's bakery, thereby indulging herself. As an antidote to this excess of cakes and pastries, Oskar develops a method, which he describes in great detail:

Oft wußte ich mir nach allzu süßen Unterrichtsstunden [...] nicht anders zu helfen, als daß ich [...] ein Stück trockenes Brot an einen Bindfaden band, in das norwegische Fäßchen mit

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<sup>7</sup> Author's translation; Manheim translates 'die Schule [...] war also kaum nach meinem Geschmack' as 'I had no yearning for the school' (TTD: 74).

<sup>8</sup> Author's translation: Manheim translates 'Behausung (dwelling, residence)' as 'place'; this loses the humour of using the term 'Behausung' in the context of the Scheffler's home.

eingelegeten Heringen tunkte und erst herauszog, wenn das Brot von der Salzlauge bis zum Überdruß durchtränkt war. Sie können sich nicht vorstellen, wie nach dem unmäßigen Kuchengenuß dieser Imbiß als Brechmittel wirkte. Oftmals gab Oskar, um abzunehmen, auf unserm Klosett für über einen Danziger Gulden Kuchen aus der Bäckerei Scheffler von sich; das war damals viel Geld (DB: 75).

*[After the cloying sweetness of those lessons [...] I would tie a string around a piece of dry bread, dip the bread in the pickled herring barrel, and remove it only when the bread was saturated with brine. You can't imagine what a blissful emetic that was for one who had eaten too much cake. In the hope of reducing, Oskar would often vomit up a whole Danzig gulden's worth of Scheffler's cake in our toilet. That was a lot of money in those days (TTD: 80).]*

#### 4. Smells and tastes: stimuli that disgust and arouse Oskar

The chapter 'Der Stundenplan [The Schedule]' is partly devoted to Oskar's brief experiences with the school. Oskar tells us that his disgust for his classmates is directly related to the effluvia of the slates' sponges, maybe similar to the 'säuerliche Wolken in Satans Achselhölen [*acid stench in [Satan's] armpits*]' (DB: 70; TTD: 74). Sure enough, Oskar is very sensitive to smells. Many characters in the novel are typified through the smell they emit; for example, his grandmother's smell of 'light rancid butter'. Towards the end of the novel, Oskar lists, as he is being chased by Interpol detectives, a sequence of smells 'assailing' him which are linked to moments, more or less important, in his life (DB: 488; TTD: 561); among others, the sardine oil his mother used to kill herself, the smell of Jan — cologne and 'the smell of early death [that] had seeped through all his buttonholes' — Greff's winter potatoes, Roswitha's cinnamon, the 'Catholic smell' and many others. The first of these smells is 'Maria's youthful vanilla', which Oskar passionately describes when he introduces her character (DB: 217; TTD: 248). Again, the relationship between them could be read as a sign of an Oedipal complex on Oskar's part: as Matzareth's second wife, Maria is Oskar's surrogate mother. The child unwilling to grow is at, this point, already sixteen years old and considers Maria his first love. She is seventeen and treats the dwarf as a little child; she washes him every evening and is not worried about being seen undressed. The most interesting episode for the purposes of our argument occurs during a trip to the seaside, when Maria is completely nude in a changing room on the beach. 'Frightened [by] her hairy triangle',

Oskar sprang auf, warf sich Maria zu. Die fing ihn auf mit ihren Haaren. Er ließ sich das Gesicht zuwachsen. Zwischen die Lippen wuchs es ihm. Maria lachte und wollte ihn wegziehen. Ich aber zog immer mehr von ihr in mich hinein, kam dem Vanillegeruch auf die Spur. [...] Erst [...] als mir die Vanille Tränen in die Augen preßte, als ich schon Pfifferlinge oder sonst was Strenges, nur keine Vanille mehr schmeckte, als dieser Erdgeruch, den Maria hinter der Vanille verbarg, mir den modernden Jan Bronski auf die Stirn nagelte und mich für alle Zeiten mit dem Geschmack der Vergänglichkeit verseuchte, da ließ ich los (DB: 220).

*[Oskar jumped up and flung himself on Maria. She caught him with her hair. He buried his face in it. It grew between his lips. Maria laughed and tried to pull him away. I drew more and more of her into me, looking for the source of the vanilla smell. [...] Only when my feet slipped and I hurt her – for I didn't let go the hair or perhaps it was the air that didn't let me go – only when*



*the vanilla brought tears to my eyes, only when I began to taste mushrooms or some acrid spice, in any case, something that was not vanilla, only when this earthy smell that Maria concealed behind the vanilla brought me back to the smell of the earth where Jan Bronski lay moldering and contaminated me for all the time with the taste of perishability (TTD: 250-251).]*

The dwarf's erotic turmoil illuminates a connection of which Oskar wasn't aware: the connection between love and death, a concept far removed from any romantic sentimentalism. In Oskar's perception, the vague smell of rot in Maria's genitals is directly linked to the fact of Jan's putrefaction, evoked just before, during the trip to the seaside. It's interesting to notice that the dwarf, in the very moment he enters in the adults' world with this first, clumsy, and somehow unintentional sexual act, doesn't think of his mother, already dead at this point in the novel, but of his possible father, whose death he caused. Different impulses are mixed in the awkward cunnilingus: not only sexual ones but also olfactory and alimentary, since Oskar is 'looking for the source of the vanilla smell'. In this episode, disgust again has a gnoseological function: the promise of wellness and happiness linked to the sex act proves to be false when linked to the loss of beloved persons. This is the point where Oskar's uneasy Eden, which enables him to escape from responsibilities by remaining a child, shows its limits. Here he is at liberty to satisfy his erotic desires free of any commitment (with Maria, with Lina Greff), but, at the same time, he is left in an indeterminacy of affections. Being completely self-centred, so unable to connect with anything outside of himself, he cannot feel the warmth of relationships founded on deep love and is therefore condemned to loneliness.

The obsession with Maria's smell continues to underpin the narrative. It's not surprising to find Oskar disturbed by the 'dicksüssige, gelbsüssige [...] Vanillesoße [*rich and yellow and viscous vanilla sauce*]' (DB: 250; TTD: 286) served with the chocolate pudding during the baptism of his brother (or perhaps his son), Kurt. The dwarf finds shelter in the company of another female character, Lina Greff, 'eine [von Jahr zu Jahr] immer übler riechenden Schlampe [a] [*from year to year*] increasingly foul-smelling sloven]' (DB: 243; TTD: 278). Here he breathes her peculiar effluvium:

[Oskar] genoß zum erstenmal jene, der Lina Greff eigene Ausdünstung, die jede Vanille sofort überschrie, verschluckte, tötete.

So säuerlich es mich auch ankam, verharrte ich dennoch in der neuen Geruchsrichtung, bis mir alle mit der Vanille zusammenhängenden Erinnerungen betäubt zu sein schienen. Langsam, lautlos und Krampflos überkam mich ein befreiender Brechreiz. [...] [Da] begriff ich meine Ohnmacht, schwamm ich in meiner Ohnmacht, breitete sich Oskars Ohnmacht zu Füßen der Lina Greff aus — und ich beschloß, [...] meine Ohnmacht zu Frau Greff zu tragen. (DB: 250)

*[For the first time [Oskar] breathed the effluvium peculiar to Lina Greff, which instantly outshouted, engulfed and killed all Vanilla.*

*Acrid as it was to my nostrils, I clung to the new perfume until all recollections connected with vanilla sauce seemed to be dulled. Slowly, without the slightest sound or spasm, I was seized with a redeeming impulse to vomit [...]. I became fully aware of my helplessness, I wallowed in*

*my helplessness, spread Oskar's helplessness out at the feet of Lina Greff — and decided [...] to carry my helplessness [...] to Frau Greff" (TTD: 286).]*<sup>9</sup>

Oskar's 'helplessness' corresponds to the impossibility of satisfying his desires. The emetic effect doesn't originate from the simple, instinctive, and mechanical reaction of the body confronted with the mixing of the two smells, Maria's delicate vanilla, evoked by the cream and by her presence, and Lina's acrid effluvia; it takes on a gnoseological value, since it allows Oskar to understand the importance of erotic desire in the world he is building. Lina Greff's 'streng sauerliche[r], vielfach gewobene[r] Dunstkreis [*acrid vapors, compounded of multiple effluvia*]' (DB: 251; TTD: 287) plays a key role here. These 'effluvia', to which the dwarf is indifferent or which may even be an erotic stimulant, are very disturbing for Lina's husband, who, without a word and without so much as a glance at the bed, always brings, together with soap and a towel, a washbasin full of warm water into the room where Oskar has been satisfying his wife, because he can't stand her smell on the dwarf's body, when they meet later (DB: 254; TTD: 291). The bed in which Lina repeatedly entertains Oskar becomes a terrain for erotic, artistic, and military exercises; so that the dwarf is brought 'zu [einem] breit epischen Atem [[*to a*] *broad epic breath*]' (DB: 251; TTD: 287). Disgust, eroticism, and art melt together in a productive and dynamic complex.

The incident at Kurt's baptism is recalled during the visit paid to Sister Dorothea's room, some years later. Her brassiere, hanging on a chair, allows Oskar to remember that impulse to vomit and the extreme sweetness of Maria's vanilla smell. Its concavities are

Schüssel[], die ich tagtäglich, die Kost nicht kennend, gerne ausgelöffelt hätte; ein zeitweiliges Erbrechen schon einbeziehend, denn jeder Brei ist manchmal zum Kotzen, dann wieder Süß hinterher, zu süß oder so süß, daß der Brechreiz Geschmack findet und wahrer Liebe Proben stellt (DB: 408).

[*bowls, which in my ignorance of their contents I should gladly have lapped up with a teaspoon day after day; I might have experienced some vomiting now and then, for too much of any fare will unsettle the stomach; but after the impulse to vomit sweetness, such sweetness as to make nausea desirable, the seal of true love (TTD: 469).]*<sup>10</sup>

Overcoming the disgust seems to be this 'seal of true love'. That can nevertheless be true only in particular situations, as the first encounter with Klepp the jazz flautist shows. Klepp has 'den Geruch einer Leiche an sich, die nicht aufhören kann, Zigaretten zu rauchen, Pfefferminz zu lutschen und Knoblauchdünste auszuschneiden [*the smell of a corpse that never stops smoking cigarettes, sucking peppermints, and eating garlic*]' (DB: 416; TTD: 479). Oskar is amused by

<sup>9</sup> Author's note: The translation has been slightly adapted; Manheim actually translates 'ein befreiender Brechreiz' as 'a redeeming nausea'.

<sup>10</sup> Author's note: The translation has been slightly adapted; Manheim translates both 'Erbrechen' (vomit/vomiting) and 'Brechreiz' (impulse to vomit) as 'nausea'.

this artist, his very counterpart in individualism, so lazy, that he doesn't get up when he has to urinate and uses the same water to cook spaghetti many times, until it becomes an 'immer sämiger werdende Brühe [*increasingly viscous liquid*]' (DB: 418; TTD: 480). De-familiarisation emerges here principally from the contrast between the chaotic and dirty scenery — it is hard to imagine a place more different from the petit bourgeois living rooms of Oskar's childhood! —and their dialogue, so courteous it becomes surreal: two tramps treating each other like English lords. Klepp invites the dwarf to eat some spaghetti, cooked in the horrid liquid and in a dirt-encrusted pot. Oskar notices how unpleasant the tableware is; Klepp offers him 'das scheußlichsten aller Teller [*the most loathsome dish I have ever seen*]', just wiped with an old newspaper, together with 'üblem, den Fingern klebendem Besteck [*a spoon and a fork so greasy to my fingers*]' (DB: 420; TTD: 482). Even Oskar, who can't be defined a fussy person, finds the whole situation repugnant: Klepp's smell, the unhygienic state of the room, the dirt on pot and tableware. But immediately after that, Oskar makes an observation, which is characteristic for the elements I have tried to highlight in the previous pages:

Bis heute hat Oskar nicht verstehen können, wie er sich damals zum Gebrauch von Löffel und Gabel hat aufraffen können. Wunderbarerweise schmeckte mir das Gericht. Es wurden mir sogar jene Kleppschen Spaghetti zu einem kulinarischen Wertmesser, den ich von jenem Tag an jedem Menu anlegte, das mir vorgesetzt wurde (DB: 420).

[*To this day Oskar is at loss to say how he summoned up the courage to ply his fork and his spoon. Strange to say, I enjoyed that spaghetti. In fact, Klepp's spaghetti became for me a culinary ideal, by which from that day on I have measured every menu that is set before me (TTD: 483).*]

Disgust again acquires a gnoseological function: through Klepp's spaghetti, Oskar learns to value relationships and not the milieu, overcoming, in this way, the petit bourgeois logic of embroidery and obsessively beaten carpets. In this case, it is not the violence of his playmates that compels him to overcome repugnance but rather the courtesy of his host. This courtesy has nothing to do with hypocritical bourgeois manners; it is not simply another means by which to gain personal profit, to the detriment of the others. The spaghetti eaten with Klepp represents a step forward for Oskar's life and friendships; they become a 'meal of solidarity' (see Wierlacher 1987: 66) where the differences between tablemates are obliterated in favour of a participating, collaborative fraternity.

### **Conclusion**

One last, erratic consideration: although the protest Oskar drums up is fully apolitical (in that he drums against every kind of assembly and trumpeted ideals) and made 'aus privaten, dazu ästhetischen Gründen [*for private and what is more esthetic reasons*]' (DB: 100; TTD: 109), the novel can be considered, among other things, a sort of accusation against those German

citizens who hung on to their uncanny childhood for twelve years, loving their Führer as a father, but not trying to kill him, and playing with what should have been considered disgusting, like arbitrary acts and violence against the defenceless. An obvious example of this is the fall of Meyn, the trumpeter. As soon as he begins to wear the uniform of the SA, he exchanges his positive attitude towards life for a malign obsession with order and tidiness; as the bad smell of his four cats reminds him of his former way of life, he cruelly feels obliged to kill them. In other words, his disgust is applied toward the wrong object. In this sense, the novel is quite close to the idea of the *Inability to Mourn* demonstrated by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967). The true object of mourning for Germans after the end of the war was the loss of the Führer (and with him the narcissistic illusion of the Ego prominence) and not the conscience of the crimes committed in Hitler's name. According to Grass, the children-Germans were all too willing to take advantage of the situation of enforced minority created by the regime; in this way, they were able to use the shelter of 'natural' infantile blindness as a justification for their lack of disgust towards the regime's crime acts.

Oskar has another idea of childhood, very similar to the idea of humanity. Outstanding in this sense is an observation he made on his first and only school day. The unpleasant teacher drums for a moment with him, relieving herself of her 'vorgeschrieben Existenzkarikatur [[*the prescribed caricature of her livelihood*]]'<sup>11</sup>. Oskar is ready to recognise, even in her, a character finally 'menschlich, das heißt, kindlich, neugierig, vielschichtig und unmoralisch [*human, that is, childlike, curious, complex, and immoral*]' (DB: 63; TTD: 72).

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<sup>11</sup> Author's translation: Manheim translates 'vorgeschrieben Existenzkarikatur' as 'prescribed occupational caricature'.

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## Dealing with Impurities of Childbirth: Contemporary Reconfiguration of Disgust in India

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### Abstract

For a long time in India, childbirth belonged to the exclusive domain of traditional midwives, the so called *dāī*. Because notions of impurity (*aśuddh*) and shame (*śaram*) are intrinsically connected to delivery in the Hindu system, childbirth used to fall upon 'specialists of impure tasks' (Dumont, 1966: 70). Even though some of these women are called upon for their skills, they today still remain requested to handle in particular physically the impure substances of delivery (blood, umbilical cord, placenta among others) as well as the mother and the new-born baby in the impure state in which they are.

The article analyses how concerns with physical proximity are reshaped in the current context of the increasing institutionalisation of motherhood. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the obstetrics service of a government hospital in Jaipur (Rajasthan), the author demonstrates that the minimisation of contact is driven less by the notion of ritual impurity (traditionally inherent in delivery) or by some hygienic prescriptions (aimed at preventing contamination) than by the feeling of socio-moral disgust experienced by members of the hospital staff while in contact with illiterate and underprivileged low caste/class patients.

While many investigators have underlined the evolution of conscientiousness concerns in hospitals, the article instead shows how staff are increasingly hiding or keeping quiet any feeling of disgust and also focuses on the reasons why both trainee doctors and nurses openly show their disgust in front of some of the patients. The article demonstrates that, while expressing socio-moral disgust contributes to maintaining social boundaries, its main objective is 'performative' (Austin, 1962), i.e. to correct effectively 'non cooperative patients' as well as 'bad citizens'.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** impurity, socio-moral disgust, India, hospital, childbirth.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015.



Disgust has been the focus of in-depth and often well-known studies in the many fields: in History, we find Corbin's *Le miasme et la jonquille. L'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (2008) and Vigarello's *Le propre et le sale. L'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen-âge* (2013); Philosophy has given us discussions on the topic from Rosenkranz's *Ästhetik des Häßlichen (Aesthetics of Ugliness)* (2015), first published in the mid-nineteenth century, and, more recently, from Sartre (*La nausée* (1972)) and Nussbaum (*Hiding from Humanity* (2004)); in Psychology, we have Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (Civilisation and its Discontents)* (2001) and Kolnai's *Der Ekel (On Disgust)* (1998), both dating from the late 1920s, and, at the turn of this century, Rozin, Haidt & McCauley's 'Disgust' (2000); Bourdieu's *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (1979) and Elias's *La Civilisation des mœurs* (1973) have considered the topic in Sociology. Anthropology, however, seems to have approached disgust in a more scattered way, through broad structuralist and symbolic theories of categorisation (Douglas 1992), as well as through more personal and anecdotal experiences of disgust felt during fieldwork and reported with little theoretical ambition. As the American anthropologist Deborah Durham (2011: 135) recently underlined, the heuristic uses of disgust remain, in the field of anthropology, relatively under-theorised, and disgust should become 'something to prompt us to ask us questions, not an object in and of itself'. In the last decade, there has appeared a growing number of studies, the aim of which is to analyse the strategies to deal with disgust put in place by professionals and institutions (Memmi, Raveneau, & Taïeb 2011). In line with these studies, the focus of this article is to consider the social functions and implications of disgust by analysing how the impure aspects of childbirth have been and are now dealt with in India by the people, mainly women, whose expertise traditionally enabled them to assist in the process of childbirth and by contemporary institutions.

As both ethnographic and sociological studies of institutions have often underlined, the term 'dirty work' generally refers to stigmatised tasks delegated to specialists belonging to subordinated groups; accounts of childbirth in India confirm this general rule. The Sanskrit word *sūtaka* refers specifically to the impurity linked to childbirth,<sup>2</sup> and French anthropologist

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<sup>2</sup> While many authors (Banerji 1971; Dumont 1966; Sinclair Stevenson 1982) consider *sūtaka* to be the impurity caused among parents by a childbirth, some authors have nuanced the term, showing that, in a Hindu British community (Firth 1997) as well as in the region of Malnad in Karnataka (Harper 1964), the term is also used to mean the impurity of death and even includes the impurity of menstruation (Bean 1981). Indeed, as the eminent Indologist Pandurang Kane emphasises, *sūtaka* is used in three senses: the impurity of birth, the impurity of death or the impurity of both birth and death (1975: 648).

Louis Dumont has noted that, for Hindus, childbirth is so impure that the process is conceptually linked to the lowest castes of the untouchables.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in India childbirth is so tightly linked to impurity (*asuddh*), shame (*śaram*), and dirty work (*gandā kām*) that by tradition only ‘specialists of the impure tasks’ (Dumont, 1966: 70), the so called *dāī* used to, and still, handle delivery. These traditional attendants are women, generally of low caste, who acquire their knowledge from their mothers or mothers-in-law by experience. As a category of person, Hindu society views these women with ambivalence. On the one hand, they enjoy social recognition. On the other hand, their expertise is often undervalued; some are called only to deal with impure tasks, such as cutting the umbilical cord, dealing with the placenta, or bathing the new-born baby and mother, rather than for their actual skills (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Lyon 2002: 92).

These ‘specialists of the impure tasks’ have been subjected to growing social discredit since the beginning of colonisation, as is evidenced by the sharp criticism manifest in the accounts of colonisers and medical missionaries, criticism which has been reinforced in recent decades by the Indian government.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is important to recall that, since Independence in 1947, maternal and child healthcare have not truly been on the Indian government’s health agenda. Following the Millennium Development Goals announced in 2000, which included the reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates, the central government has, however, undertaken two crucial programmes during the last decade: *Jananī Surakṣā Yojnā* (Programme for Maternal Protection) in 2005 and *Jananī Śiśu Surakṣā Kāryakram* (Programme for Maternal and Infantile Protection) in 2011. First, maternal healthcare, namely, antenatal check-ups, medicines, deliveries (including C-section), and hospitalisation, is provided for free in all government hospitals. Secondly, patients receive a small financial compensation of 1000 or 1400 INR (£12–18/15–21€) after an institutionalised delivery, as an incentive to stop women from delivering at home with traditional birth attendants (*dāī*).<sup>5</sup>

Since these schemes were launched, traditional birth attendants have been less and less called upon, while doctors, who are mainly high class/caste, supervise an increasing number of deliveries in government hospitals. In June 2011, Ghulam Nabi Azad, the Minister of Health

<sup>3</sup> This comparison has been criticised by many authorities (Bean 1981; Das 1976; Harper 1964; Parry 1991) since the first impurity is temporary, while the second is permanent.

<sup>4</sup> The lack of hygiene was particularly criticised: ‘Cleanliness is a thing unknown to her. Soap and water are her great enemies. Often she is so dirty she stinks, and her hands and nails are covered with dirt’ (Misty 1924; quoted by Forbes (2005:79)). Because of their ‘ignorance and superstitions’, *dāīs* were also held responsible for ‘hundred[s] of lives’ sacrificed (Beilby 1882: 342; quoted by Burton (2006: 383)).

<sup>5</sup> These are the sums given in the so called ‘Low Performing States’ (LPS) to which Rajasthan belongs. In the ‘High Performing States’ (HPS), sums are slightly less (600 or 700 INR). For those in the poorest social stratum, whose daily wage averages 150 INR, 1400 INR thus represents approximately ten days’ work.



and Family Welfare, proudly announced at the Plenary of the High Level Meeting on HIV/Aids during the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly that 700,000 women in India had had an institutional delivery in 2005–06 but more than ten million in 2010–11 (Azad 2011: 2).

My object in this article is to understand how the increasing institutionalisation of maternal healthcare reshapes conceptions of disgust inherent (or not) to childbirth. To do so, I will rely on the anthropological fieldwork I conducted in Jaipur (Rajasthan) over 18 months in 2011–2012 as part of my doctoral research on the politics of health reproduction. More precisely, I will focus on a three-month study I carried out in one of Jaipur's main government-run obstetrics hospitals (Hospital H)<sup>6</sup>. Through ethnographic vignettes, I will demonstrate that the disgust felt by caregivers stems from their socio-religious background rather than from bodily substances thought to be impure. To this end, I will underline the ways in which the stigma of patients' bodies relies on socio-moral disgust. This will lead me to question the reasons why some hospital staff hide this objectionable socio-moral disgust by overplaying physical disgust reactions. Finally, I will explore the impact of these reactions on patients.

### **1. The prejudices against the body of the poor**

Knowing the importance of childbirth-related impurity in the Hindu system, I expected to find during my fieldwork that hospital staff would be particularly cautious in the way of dealing with it. On the contrary, the disapproval that I detected never concerned either the ritual impurity of childbirth or the substances (such as blood, stools, urine) associated with the process of delivery; disgust was rarely expressed as a result of physical contact with these substances. In fact, it transpired that the expressions of physical disgust were but a cover for deep-seated feelings of social contempt.

A case in point is that of Sohan, a woman of twenty-five occupying one of the six beds in the labour ward. All the while she was moaning during strong and painful contractions, the nurses were rudely ordering her to keep quiet. When telling her to 'shut up', not only did they tap Sohan's mouth with a finger, they also employed the disrespectful form *tū*.<sup>7</sup> At one point, Sohan turned onto her side to vomit; immediately, one of the nurses rushed forward and spread out Sohan's scarf (*dupattā*) to prevent her from soiling the bed.

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<sup>6</sup> In order to guarantee the anonymity of both the hospital and its staff, all the names used in this article have been changed.

<sup>7</sup> Hindi distinguishes between three second person pronouns: '*āp*', the most polite and common form is used when addressing adults, '*tūm*' when more familiarity is permissible or when addressing people who are 'lower' in the social order, and '*tū*' in intimate relationships, in addressing God, with children or, as in this case, as an offensive and disrespectful form.

A few minutes later, Vasudha, also twenty-five, who was in her first year as a trainee doctor, entered the labour ward and shouted with a laugh, 'Oh, my God!' while pointing to Sohan's forearm. Tattooed on her arm in capital letters were her husband's name followed by the words 'my wife' and 'Sohan'. Although Sohan was both in pain and embarrassed to see us staring at her, the trainee doctor continued to make fun of her tattoo, making faces of contempt and, very visibly, wanting me to join in her laughter.

These tattoos are quite common among low class/caste in both rural and tribal areas. While vomit or other substances involved in delivery are never commented upon, social marks on the bodies of patients (e.g. callused feet, dirt, or tattoos) are, in contrast, openly discussed and stigmatised. Indeed, at Hospital H, which is both a government and a referral hospital, many of the patients were illiterate women, both Hindus and Muslims, coming from rural villages or peri-urban slums located a few kilometres away.<sup>8</sup> Constantly, these women were referred to by the staff as 'uneducated', 'unhygienic' or 'country bumpkins' (*gānvar*). In the delivery room or operating theatre, doctors used to complain about women who were overweight, while trainee doctors used to snigger and make comments amongst themselves about the extent of a woman's pubic hair, even calling to each other to come and look at her as she was lying on her back exposed to view. When some trainee doctors or nurses disapprove of such features as overweight or an excess of pubic hair, they offer neither medical nor hygienic reasons to justify their attitude. Their disgust mainly stems from the degree of social difference between them and people belonging to underprivileged groups. In other words, the stigma of the body appears to be based on socio-moral disgust.

The seeming lack of core disgust could be discussed through the lens of the 'hedonic explanation' developed by Paul Rozin (2008). As this psychologist has shown, professionals like doctors who are repeatedly in contact with strong elicitors mainly cope with them by developing 'processes of adaptation'. The experiment he conducted indeed reveals a significant decrease of sensitivity to touching cold dead bodies among medical students who have spent two to three months dissecting cadavers. The seeming prominence of socio-moral disgust could be discussed in line with the study of Jane Simpson and her colleagues which shows how 'the disgust response to core items decreased over time whereas the disgust response to socio-moral items intensified over time' (Simpson & others 2006: 39). The analysis relied on experimental tests where participants had to measure their emotions three times after being exposed to

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<sup>8</sup> A referral hospital is a central hospital with more sophisticated facilities and offering a greater range of specialist treatments to which patients with complications are sent from smaller hospitals or subcentres in the region.

photographs (eight represented core disgust elicitors and eight represented socio-moral disgust elicitors). However, this line of analysis would not help in understanding the reasons why the medical staff of Hospital H. so repeatedly and explicitly express disgust. This might partly be linked to the fact that a central element in the following ethnography is taking into consideration the status as well as the social and religious identity of the people, whereas Rozin's psychological studies, while they clearly demonstrate that the variations in the degree of disgust are linked to the criteria of time or the nature of the elicitors involved, are silent as regards the social identity of the people and the social function of disgust.

## 2. A subterfuge for stronger condemnations

Several social scientists have underlined how health professionals increasingly tend to nuance and deny the disgust they might feel while being in presence of either patients (Marché Paillé 2010; Molinier 2013), the elderly (Schaub & others 2012) or cadavers (Jeanjean, 2011). Drawing on her observations made both during fieldwork in French hospitals and humanitarian experience in medical missions in Africa, the French philosopher Christiane Vollaire (2011) shows how signs of disgust are perceived to be shameful, weakening, and unprofessional, and are consequently emotions suppressed by medical staff. Within the medical community, to feel disgust, let alone to express it, is a major taboo, to the extent that, as Vollaire stresses (2011: 95), not to display disgust becomes a sort of '*mutilation sacrificielle*' (sacrificial mutilation) — a violation of the sense of humanity which conditions medical practice. In the light of this, one might wonder why, on the contrary, the staff in Hospital H so openly express disregard and disgust.

It must be remembered that, since the establishment of the Indian Constitution in 1947, discrimination on grounds of caste or religious differences is punishable (Article 15). However, caste resentment was common at the hospital, due to positive actions that have benefited depressed castes, with important reservation of quotas for Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) as well as negative stereotypes about Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Several doctors said that they found it necessary to keep their distance from Muslim patients, when having to deal with a crowd of patients in the ante-natal clinic, and complained to me in terms similar to those of Ravindra, a first year trainee doctor: 'We can't say anything to them. And if we do so, they go and complain to their minister, [the health minister of Rajasthan, Aimaduddin Ahmad Khan, a Muslim] and then we get a phone call!'

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<sup>9</sup> Since 1990 (Mandal Commission), 49.5% of government jobs are reserved for the lowest castes (15% for the SC, 7.5% for the ST and 27% for the OBC).

To avoid being blamed, medical staff often resort to subterfuges. For example, between each other, nurses often refer to Muslim patients by the letter M, in order to ‘make better fun of them’ in a more discreet way<sup>10</sup>. Comments as well as facial expressions of disgust were often exaggerated in front of the patients. My hypothesis is that the disclosure of their disgust about concrete facts, such as illiteracy or dirt, enabled medical staff to discriminate against patients in a safe and non-political way. To put it another way and as will be developed below, the medical staff stigmatise and demean the patient without exposing themselves to the risk of punishment.

This type of approach was particularly common in the family planning department, located in the basement of the hospital. One of the first comments made to me by the head of family planning, a Sikh Punjabi doctor in her thirties, was that Hospital H was ‘a Muslim hospital’ and that the problematic demographic explosion in India was due to ‘the over-reproductivity’ of Muslim women. The two Hindu nurses who assisted her agreed that ‘nowadays, Muslim patients are in each and every corner of the hospital’.

One morning, two ladies both wearing the *burka* arrived. One of them complained about strong lower abdominal pain. She was doubled up with her hands on her stomach and collapsed onto one of the chairs. This lady had come to the hospital the previous day to have a sonogram done. According to the results everything was in order; however, the lady had been suffering violent pains since five o’clock that morning, which she attributed to the contraceptive device she had had fitted eighteen months earlier. One of the nurses took a few steps back and covered her nose with her hand. The other, who was sitting behind her desk and holding her nose, also made clear her feelings of disgust and disbelief. Without even looking at the patient, she gave her some medicine and dismissed her. By the time the two ladies were at the door, the nurses were already fanning the air with their hands and complaining about ‘the stench of the women’, due to the fact that ‘they change clothes only on Fridays’, while ‘burkas are washed only once a year!’. For my part, I had not noticed any particular smell, and it is worth adding that the nurses’ criticism of the ladies’ lack of hygiene was not accompanied by any advice to them as regards the importance of better hygiene practices on medical grounds.

Clearly, the explicit facial expression of disgust was a subterfuge. Indeed, it is important to note that the nurses waited for the women to be outside the room before making explicitly racist comments, and that, all the while they were in the women’s presence, their behaviour

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, and as I underline in my PhD thesis (2016), this code seems less a precautionary measure in order to speak about Muslim patients than a kind of humorous complicity that nurses adopt for professional solidarity.

would hardly have been called objectionable. In the main, the nurses made faces which could be attributable to core disgust, a rejection reaction commonly said to be instinctive and irrepressible, thus unquestionable. As the French philosopher Claire Margat puts it, disgust ‘n'est pas un jugement, ni même un sentiment, c'est une réaction de rejet, une émotion relative à des sensations [*is not a judgement, nor even a feeling, but a reaction of rejection, an emotion related to sensations*]' (2011: 19).<sup>11</sup> But, undoubtedly, by either feigning or exaggerating feelings of visceral disgust, their theatrical game was such that outside observers could easily notice that what was at issue here was a deeper and personal contempt of Muslim women. In other words, they do indeed employ small strategies of simulation, but little effort is made not to be discovered. Not only is the Muslim community said to ‘always refuse family planning’ and be held responsible for the main developmental issues in India, but, according to the hospital staff, Muslims are always favoured by government policies and unfairly benefit from government schemes.

In short, these two Hindu nurses, faced with two Muslim patients, were seeking a means whereby to express their sense of having been victimised by a state system that they feel unjustly favours the Muslim population and lower castes.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it was a way to compensate for the broader unfair situation they often commented on. As it will be further discussed in the next section, by showing that the smell of the two Muslim patients was unbearable, the family planning nurses also effectively managed to reduce the length of time the women were present in the clinic.

### **3. Expecting ‘performativeness’**

In the literature on disgust, the justification for it is often discussed in functionalist terms by highlighting two principal and well-founded functions. First, in line with Darwin’s explanations published in *Man and Animal* in 1872, disgust reactions are held to preserve humans from dangers which could imperil their physical and moral integrity; it is, as some American psychologists have emphasised in their brief overview of the cultural expansion of disgust, ‘a mechanism for avoiding harm to the body became a mechanism for avoiding harm to the soul’ through a similar contamination potency (Rozin, et al. 2000: 650). Secondly, in line with the theories of Norbert Elias (1973) and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1979), taste as well as disgust elicitors have been discussed through their function of social differentiation. Undoubtedly in

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<sup>11</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>12</sup> For more details on the way government policies interfere on the attitudes of some of the hospital staff towards patients, see Jullien (2015).

the hospital, expressing disgust often contributed to maintaining or reinforcing social boundaries by allowing the staff to display both social and moral superiority in front of patients coming from disadvantaged background. Auxiliaries (*bāī*), who often came from the same social and economic background as the patients, particularly tend to be strongly disapproving of patients.

That function is, however, probably only the tip of the iceberg. At Hospital H., the reaction of disgust was mainly intended to operate for its ‘performativeness’, so that the social expression of the reaction of disgust (whether by facial expression or spoken comments) echoed the claim of the British philosopher John Austin (1962: 6) regarding ‘performative utterances’ in which ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’. Similarly, among the hospital staff, disgust was frequently displayed before patients or their family members since, as the following example shows, the action was aimed at correcting their behaviours without the need for explanations.

In the delivery room, it is not uncommon for trainee doctors, who have already ordered a woman to be quiet and push, suddenly to exclaim, ‘This woman wants to kill her baby’, or tell her, ‘If you carry on like that you’ll kill your baby’, then purposely ignoring them and even eventually starting to supervise another woman’s labour. Similarly, both the facial expressions and the comments of disgust and outrage made by a member of staff initiate a process of that person’s ‘empowerment’ over any family member with the woman in labour. Often such a person (usually the woman’s mother-in-law) is called into the delivery room to bring some cloth in which to wrap the new-born baby. A nurse who was given a worn out and dirty piece of cloth by a mother-in-law would simply take the piece with fingertips, showing disgust and asking ‘What is that?!’<sup>13</sup> Also, in post-natal wards, during visiting hours, staff tried to make sure that visitors sat on the bench. If a family member was seen sitting or lying down on the bed close to the woman and the new-born baby, a member of the hospital would wrinkle his nose and say “How dirty! What are you doing?” A striking example of such an expression of disgust aimed at arousing a sense of shame in the visitor once occurred when, for a second time without permission, a man entered the Septic Labour Room where several women, partly naked, were lying, moaning or crying out in pain.<sup>14</sup> A senior female doctor asked him sarcastically: ‘So in fact you enjoy looking at that, don’t you?!’

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<sup>13</sup> Families frequently justified having brought old pieces of cloth for this purpose, on the grounds that worn-out cloth is softer. Another possible reason for the habit, although one I never heard expressed, is the fact that new-born babies are believed to be impure; the cloth in which a new-born baby is wrapped, as well as what was worn by young mothers during labour, is therefore, so one is often told, thrown away after a ritual of purification.

<sup>14</sup> The Septic Labour Room is dedicated to complicated deliveries (cases of eclampsia, miscarriages, breech, etc).

All in all, by playing with feelings of shame feelings, reactions of disgust operate, as these examples show, as efficient tools for ‘governing the body’, thus saving the staff from wasting time by providing explanations or reasons. However, Austin’s theory of performativeness needs to be complemented, if this tool is to be fully understood. As Pierre Bourdieu (1982: 63) has explained through the case of instituting rites, ‘illocutionary force’ is not only based on the act of speaking. Performative locutions are efficient when they are pronounced by people invested with authority, thus when conditions of social dispositions are fulfilled. Bourdieu’s focus on the symbolic capital of the speaker is all the more important given that, in the ethnographic incidents reported, reactions of disgust from the hospital staff do not act as such but make patients act. Contrary the performative utterance as discussed by Austin, the illocutionary strength of doctors and nurses is rather ensuring that the patients will perform an (appropriate) action than itself performing an action.

To succeed in doing so, the medical staff used to explain, albeit regretfully, that habitual norms of communication were pointless ‘with such patients’. Instead, medical staff pretended to be forced to shout, to repeat the same things over and over, to use mainly imperative sentences with an unfriendly tone, and to adopt the disrespectful *tū* pronoun, in order to have the patients reacting in the expected way. ‘If we don’t shout at them, they don’t listen to us’, a trainee doctor once told me. The hospital staff could thus justify their (overplayed) expressions of disgust in a similar way: a tool they are compelled to use in order to have the patients or the anyone with them quickly adopt required or specific behaviours.

### **Conclusion: reconfiguration of disgust**

This article identifies three categories of disgust. The first one concerns the disgust a childbirth specialist might feel while having to deal with the impurity assigned by Hinduism to childbirth (*sūtaka*). Far from being an updated theory from Brahmanical scriptures, this impurity is still vigorously discussed among the *dāīs* of today, although, in the hospital, nothing was said or done by the staff in this respect. Notwithstanding the difficulty for the British to recruit Indian obstetricians and nurses at the time women’s hospitals were being created, historians have shown that medicine was increasingly seen as a prestigious profession, since it was characterised by ‘entry through merit (and not heredity) and specialised knowledge’ (Guha 1991: 7). The second one, which only appeared in this article by implication, is linked to the standards of hygiene which hospitals are perceived to be obliged to respect and maintain, in

order to prevent contamination and dissemination of diseases.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the third and last one, which has been our main focus of attention, is a socio-moral disgust in which aversion partly results from negative stereotypes of the person.

	Characteristic among <i>dāīs</i>	Expected in hospital	Mainly found at Hospital H
Name	Impurity	Infection	Socio-moral disgust
Type	Ritual	Medical	Interpersonal
Source	All patients	Lack of hygiene (virus, bacteria)	Some categories of patients
Degree of responsibility of the patient	None	Partial	Full
Measure undertaken by the specialist faced with it	Doing rituals	Following some measure of hygiene	Playing with disgust categories

SUMMARY TABLE SHOWING THE THREE FORMS OF DISGUST

As we have seen in this ethnography, the fear of contact is driven less by the notion of ritual impurity (traditionally inherent to delivery) or by some hygienist prescriptions (aimed at preventing contamination) than by a feeling of socio-moral disgust and, more precisely, of interpersonal disgust.<sup>16</sup> Members of the hospital staff feel, or rather express, disgust (playing with the categories of disgust) while being in contact with illiterates and underprivileged low caste patients, both villagers and Muslims;<sup>17</sup> these are accused of being bad patients, bad mothers and bad Indian citizens because of their lack of hygiene, their illiteracy, their superstitions, and/or their fertility.

In this respect, while many Western sociologists and psychologists show that health professionals resort to procedures to minimise, even to deny, the feeling of socio-moral disgust, quite the contrary seems to happen in Hospital H. The social implications of real or feigned disclosure of disgust are threefold. Among the hospital staff, expressions of disgust not only

<sup>15</sup> Length constraints do not allow me to develop this aspect but, as I show in my PhD thesis (2016), the fear of having their physical integrity jeopardized by pathogens was relatively low among the staff.

<sup>16</sup> As Gordon Hodson and Kimberly Costello have shown, this form of disgust ‘is not accounted for by fear of infection, but rather is mediated by ideological orientations and dehumanizing group representations’(2007: 691).

<sup>17</sup> It echoes the notion of ‘chronical integral disgust’ (sense of belonging of the people) developed by Audrey Abitan (2012).



serve social distinctiveness and professional complicity, they also perform as a risk-free way to vent their frustration as well as an efficient tool to heighten the compliance of patients.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This article is partly based on a presentation entitled 'Des parturientes bien embarrassantes: la hiérarchie médicale indienne à l'épreuve' which the author gave at the fifth congress of the Association Française de Sociologie (Nantes, 2013) and which has been published in a collection entitled *Le social à l'épreuve du dégoût* (2016, Presses Universitaires de Rennes) and assembled under the direction of Dominique Memmi, Gilles Raveneau and Emmanuel Taïeb, and the author acknowledges the help she undoubtedly received from their pertinent observations. The author also gratefully thanks the organisers of the *Skepsi* conference, the participants and the reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions, as well as the CEIAS (EHESS/Paris) for financially supporting her participation at the eighth *Skepsi* conference (Kent, 2015).

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## The force of disgust in Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness*

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### Abstract

When, in 1853, Karl Rosenkranz published his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* or *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, the very title was indicative of the work's ground breaking nature, it being the first time that the ugly was expressly accorded some measure of dignity within the philosophy of art. And yet, so this article asks, can the ugly be understood in its full force within the paradigm of an Idealist aesthetics such as Rosenkranz espouses? Although in such a frame the ugly is not merely the absence of the beautiful, it can only ever be a secondary phenomenon which is subordinate to the sensuous appearance of the Idea; Rosenkranz consequently never progressed beyond affirming the always-already established primacy of the beautiful. Within a short space of time, however, the internal development of art would begin to challenge this primacy in earnest. To illustrate this, the article focuses on the particularly visceral form of ugliness that is the disgusting, through a reading Rimbaud's *Venus Anadyomène*, and concludes by arguing that a better understanding of the force of disgust compels us to reconsider and rethink, if not altogether abandon, the Idealist understanding of art as the sensuous appearance of the Idea.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** aesthetics, German Idealism, Karl Rosenkranz, Arthur Rimbaud.



Writing in the early third century A.D., Aelian recounts an old legend concerning the strange way in which the Greeks once honoured Homer, their most exalted poet:

Ptolemy Philopator built a temple to Homer. He set up a fine statue of the poet, and around it in a circle all the cities which claim Homer as theirs. The painter Galaton depicted Homer being sick, with the other poets drawing upon his vomit (Aelian 1997: *Historical Miscellany*, XIII 22)<sup>2</sup>

Some fifteen centuries later, Rosenkranz would introduce the same story into his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, with rather more detail:

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> It is here hard not to be reminded of a well-known tradition related by Athenaeus about 'the comment by the noble and distinguished Aeschylus, who used to claim that his own tragedies were steaks cut from Homer's great banquets' (Athenaeus 2007–12: *The learned banqueters*, 8.347e).

[...] selbst eine komische Wendung ist möglich, wie [...] in jenem Gemälde einer griechischen Vase, wo Homer, auf einem Polsterbett hingestreckt, sich in ein am Boden stehendes Gefäß erbricht. Eine weibliche Gestalt, die Poesie, hält ihm das göttliche Haupt. Um das Gefäß herum stehen eine Menge Zwergfiguren, die eifrig das Ausgebrochene wieder zum Munde führen. Es sind die spätern griechischen Dichter, die von dem zynisch weggeworfenen Überfluß des großen Poeten sich ernähren. Auch eine Apotheose Homers! (Rosenkranz 2007: 301)

*[[...] even a comical turn is possible, like [...] in a Greek vase painting, where Homer, reclining on a couch, vomits into a vessel standing on the floor. A female form, Poetry, supports his divine head. Around the vessel are a crowd of dwarf-like figures, who eagerly put into their mouths what has been vomited up. They are the later Greek poets, who feed themselves with the cynically discarded excess of the great poet. This, too, is a Homeric apotheosis!]<sup>3</sup>*

The description conjures up a curious image: the reclining poet, his head tenderly supported by the Muse, vomits profusely into a basin; the surrounding crowd of later Greek poets enthusiastically supping the vomit spewed forth, as if it were some choice and delightfully warm delicacy. What are we to make of this scene? Is the true wine of inspiration a poet's puke, the poetic act itself an exercise in obscene regurgitation? And where would this feast of vomitological poetics lead us, were we to give it any consideration? The philosophical understanding of what seizes us most profoundly in art has, after all, often found itself baffled by the force of disgust and, even where it has recognised this force, has been unwilling to accommodate it. For what distinguishes the disgusting is its assailing immediacy, its unavoidable *thereness* in a proximity at once too intimate to bear and yet too fascinating to escape.

The historical achievement of Karl Rosenkranz and his 1853 *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* is to confer, explicitly and for the first time, a measured dignity within the philosophy of art upon the ugly and, within the sprawling taxonomy he gives that phenomenon, also upon the particularly visceral form of the ugly that is the disgusting. Rosenkranz argues that if art is a form in which our being at home in the world is expressed, it has the right and indeed the duty not just not to look away from the ugly but rather to seek it out; so the philosopher must too, like Dante, descend into the 'Hell of the Beautiful', if he is to attain comprehension of the aesthetic. I shall, therefore, follow Rosenkranz's descent into this Hell, where:

[d]ie Schrecken der Unform und der Mißform, der Gemeinheit und der Scheußlichkeit umringen uns in zahllosen Gestalten von pygmäenhaften Anfängen bis zu jenen riesigen Verzerrungen, aus denen die infernale Bosheit zähnefletschend uns angrinst. In diese Hölle des Schönen wollen wir hier niedersteigen (*ÄdH*: 11).

*[the terrors of shapelessness and misshapeness, commonness and hideousness surround us in countless forms, from their pygmy-like beginnings to those gigantic distortions out of which infernal evil grins at us with bared teeth. It is our intention to descend into this Hell of the Beautiful.]*

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<sup>3</sup> Translations from Rosenkranz are the author's, except where otherwise indicated. From here on, Rosenkranz will be cited thus: (*ÄdH*).

The question I shall pose in this article is whether disgust is, or even can be, understood in its full force within the paradigm of Idealist aesthetics. For if Rosenkranz makes a descent *ad infernos*, he does so only in the steadfast assurance that he will rise again; although he acknowledges that the shapelessness, incorrectness and disfigurement whereby ugliness expresses itself are more than the mere absence of the beautiful and have a redoubtable negative force of their own, they are nevertheless only to be accorded the rights of second-class citizens in the realm of the beautiful, a secondary element folded into and subordinate to the Idea's sensuous appearance.

Notwithstanding this, ugliness can, says Rosenkranz, afford pleasure and does so in not one but two ways:

Auf gesunde Weise, wenn das Häßliche in der Totalität eines Kunstwerks sich als eine relative Notwendigkeit rechtfertigt und durch die Gegenwirkung des Schönen aufgehoben wird. Nicht das Häßliche als solches bewirkt dann unser Wohlgefallen, sondern das Schöne, welches den Abfall von sich, der auch zur Erscheinung kommt, überwindet. [...] Auf krankhafte Weise, wenn ein Zeitalter physisch und moralisch verderbt ist, für die Erfassung des wahrhaften, aber einfachen Schönen der Kraft entbehrt und noch in der Kunst das Pikante der frivolen Korruption genießen will (*ÄdH*, 55–56).

[In a healthy way, when the ugly justifies itself as a relative necessity in the totality of an artwork and is cancelled out by the counteraction of the beautiful. Not the ugly as such causes our pleasure then, but the beautiful overcoming its apostasy, which also appears. [...] In a pathological way, when an era is physically and morally depraved, powerless to register true but simple beauty, still wishing to enjoy in art what is piquant in frivolous corruption (2015: 54)]

As an element contained in the composition of the beautiful, the ugly affords us a healthy pleasure; yet where the ugly and 'what is piquant in frivolous corruption' it promises are pursued for themselves, such a pursuit turns sick, and consumes like a disease the beautiful embodiment of the Idea that is the work of art.

This distinction between the healthy and the sick shows that Rosenkranz remains caught in affirming an always-already established primacy of the beautiful. Yet it is precisely in his time — Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* would be published a mere four years after Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics* — that the internal development of art begins to challenge this primacy in earnest. Through a reading Rimbaud's sonnet *Venus Anadyomène*, the eponymous subject of which is notoriously 'belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus [*hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus*]', I shall argue that where the disgusting in art, as a to be determined paradigmatic form of the ugly, is understood in its proper force, we find ourselves compelled to reconsider and rethink, if not altogether abandon, the Idealist understanding of art as the sensuous appearance of the Idea.

## 1. The centrality of aesthetics to Idealism

First, however, it is appropriate to recall briefly why aesthetics should have become the passionate preoccupation of Idealism it is. For it has historically not always been obvious that aesthetic experience should constitute a *philosophical* problem, let alone what it became to Idealism: a key to the questions at the heart of philosophy itself. Kant for one would have been baffled if upon the appearance of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he should have been told that a concern for the beautiful, at this juncture altogether absent from his critical project, should furnish the means to point beyond the seemingly insurmountable antinomies of finite reason and provide an intimation, however hesitant and however inscribed in our inescapable need to see the world in a certain light, rather than in the world itself, of the super-sensible substrate of nature and freedom. Yet this intimation of the super-sensible is precisely what Kant, for all his Enlightenment aversion to *Schwärmerei* [enthusiasm], comes to affirm as the keystone of critical philosophy.

The phenomenal world, as the first *Critique* demonstrates, cannot be conceived of other than as a causally determined whole; yet critically, we cannot show that causal determinism extends beyond the realm of the senses, and so it must be at least conceivable that it does not rule out freedom in the noumenal realm, of which we cannot have knowledge. Already the second *Critique* goes well beyond this epistemological modesty; here our own practical reason imposes on us the duty to obey the moral law, but this duty would make no sense whatsoever if we were not also free in fact to fulfil it. That we *ought* to, Kant famously argues, implies that we *can* do so. If this holds good, then the freedom we, as moral agents, enjoy is not merely not ruled out but is conceptually established as a precondition for us to have moral intuitions at all; it is, in Kant's bold phrase, a fact of reason. With that, however, the question how the causally determinate nature of the phenomenal world and our duty to actualise our noumenal freedom in that world might be thought together become pressing. It is this question, and not merely the desire to discuss yet another subject matter which happens not yet to be discussed in critical philosophy, that pushes Kant to investigate the beautiful. For it is the beautiful which, by exhibiting a structure of purposiveness without determinate purpose, sets our faculties of understanding and imagination in free play and thus hints that the world, which on the one hand is a causally determined whole, is nevertheless there for us and for the realization of our moral purposes. As Kant says:

Da es aber die Vernunft auch interessiert, daß die Ideen auch objektive Realität haben, i.e. daß die Natur wenigstens eine Spur zeige oder einen Wink gebe, sie enthalte in sich irgend einen Grund, eine gesetzmäßige Übereinstimmung ihrer Produkte zu unserem, von allem Interesse

unabhängigen Wohlgefallen (welches wir a priori für jedermann als Gesetz erkennen, ohne dieses auf Beweisen gründen zu können) anzunehmen: so muß die Vernunft an jeder Äußerung der Natur von einer dieser ähnlichen Übereinstimmung ein Interesse nehmen (Kant 2009: AA 5:300).

*[But since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) also have objective reality, i.e., that nature should at least show some trace or give a sign that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize a priori as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. (Kant 2002: 5:300)]*

While Kant consistently hedges about such claims with caveats, assuring us that the glimpse of the super-sensible which the beautiful affords always remain within a logic of ‘as if’, part of our subjective grasp of the world rather than the world itself, regulative rather than constitutive, his Idealist offspring have no such qualms. For our purposes here it suffices to recall in the briefest of terms that to the young Schelling it is in aesthetic intuition and only there that the Absolute manifests itself fully; the work of art, as the determined presentation of the indeterminate, is the one true and eternal revelation we can recognise, and it reaches beyond where philosophy itself can go, into the direct yet infinitely rich, infinitely varied apprehension of the super-sensible. Hegel, for his part, may mark his distance from Romanticism by denying that the sensuous form of art can ever be an altogether adequate and final presentation of the Idea, which is properly at home only in the medium of conceptual thought; yet for him no less, art is at home in the realm of absolute spirit, and the truth which sensuously shines out from it outstrips the distinctions and contradictions that riddle the finite understanding.

The question of the beautiful is thus situated at the heart of Idealist philosophy, and its solution promises not merely an intimation but the assurance of our freedom at home with ourselves in this world. With this, the primary locus of the aesthetic shifts from nature, as a mere reflection of human spirit, to spirit itself as manifest in the work of art; and the work of art is no longer seen as occasioning one particular experience and thus tied to a particular experiencing subject but as presenting the self-assertion of spirit as such and as a whole. The work of art does not provoke or report on a hint of our being at one with the super-sensible but is a particular form of self-knowledge constituted in and articulated through sensuous appearance and, as such, is not an incidental but an essential step in affirming who we are.

## **2. The ugly in general and the disgusting in particular as aesthetic categories**

Now that we have a clearer grasp of why the beautiful should have become a crucial philosophical question in Idealism, how do we approach that which resists, denies, or subverts the beautiful? What can be done in the categories now established to grasp the ugly and, within

the broad phenomenon of the ugly, to grasp its perhaps most salient manifestation, the disgusting, as that particular form of ugliness which fills us with visceral repugnance and is yet an odd attraction? The free yet harmonious play of our faculties of which Kant speaks cannot account for it, and from this perspective ugliness cannot be more than a privation of beauty. Disgust fares yet worse, for insofar as it is at least in part a physical sensation it is, like our desire for the sensible tickle of delicate food, a topic for anthropology rather than aesthetics.

Yet the post-Kantian image of art, in which it appears not merely as the source of a subject's particular experience but, in full-blown terms, as the sensuous auto-constitution of the Absolute, is not only more accommodating of the ugly but also demands it. Nor is this merely the case because there can be no beauty without ugliness and so, as a contrasting pair, the one stands in need of the other for its existence, if it is to become visible and carry any meaning. This is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far; in this way beauty and ugliness are merely contrasted externally, and yet such an external contrast can have no meaning from the perspective of the beautiful as the sensuous appearance of the idea in its totality; for the more the work succeeds at this particular form of constitution of self-knowledge, the more it is beautiful, and neither needs nor benefits from an outside contrast.

The necessity of the inclusion of the ugly must thus, Rosenkranz argues, have deeper grounds; they lie in the essence of the Idea itself (see *ÄdH*: 43). In its sensuous appearance the Idea must be expressed in its totality. An essential element of the essence of the Idea is that it leaves the existence of its appearance free and thus allows for the possibility of the negative. Our lives are filled with a chaotic crisscrossing of the accidental, of brute drives, of caprice and passion, all of which demand to be reflected, but receive, in the unity of the work of art, an organising principle. If art is to present the Idea not in a merely one-sided fashion but represent nature and spirit in their full dramatic depth, then it must include the negative. However, precisely because it is negative, the ugly remains secondary to beauty, for the beautiful on its own can be art, while the ugly only has its place in a larger economy in art where it is opposed, contained, and overcome by the beautiful.

This principle in place, Rosenkranz provides us with an elaborate taxonomy of the ugly. Of interest to us here is above all the disgusting, which he categorizes as a type of *Deformation* [disfigurement], namely one that is *widrig* [repugnant] and, more specifically, *scheußlich* [abhorrent]. Within the abhorrent, one finds the ideal form of *das Abgeschmackte* [the tasteless] which consists of negation of the understanding; disgust, on the contrary, is the real form that



negates physical beauty of shape through putrefaction; in this sense, it is the sensuously absurd, a reversal of the order of life over death, or the idea of death grotesquely imitating life.

Könnte man eine große Stadt, wie Paris, einmal umkehren, so daß das Unterste zu Oberst käme und nun nicht bloß die Jauche der Kloaken, sondern auch die lichtscheuen Tiere zum Vorschein gebracht würden, die Mäuse, Ratten, Kröten, Würmer, die von der Verwesung leben, so würde dies ein entsetzlich ekelhaftes Bild sein (*ÄdH*: 295).

[*If one were to turn upside down a great city like Paris, so that its lowest parts would come out on top, and not merely the filth of the sewers would be made manifest, but also the creatures that shy away from daylight, the mice, the rats, the toads, the worms who live off of all that is putrid, this would be a horrifyingly disgusting image.*]

Despite Rosenkranz's obvious relish for the vileness of this description, however, it is his yet greater love for philosophical category-mongering which precludes for him the possibility of recognising in it something akin to the sublime. For, unlike the relative isolation in which the analytic of the sublime stands within Kant's aesthetics — it does not form a genuine part of the programme of a critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, and testifies only to the sovereignty of the subject, not to its being at home in the world, Rosenkranz reintegrates the sublime by making both it and the agreeable two sub-forms of beauty. Sublime beauty is negated in its lofty nobility by what is base or common; the agreeably beautiful by the disagreeable or repugnant. It is this a priori exclusion of any notion of sublimity from the field of disgust which critically blinds Rosenkranz to the potential aesthetic force of the disgusting. Yet it is precisely this possibility which Rimbaud would explore and exploit a couple of decades later.

### 3. Rimbaud's challenge

The particular strength of fascination which the polluted, the rotten, and the revolting exercise upon the febrile imagination of French verse of the second half of the nineteenth century provides Rosenkranz's aesthetics of ugliness with a crucial challenge. Baudelaire's infamous 'Une charogne' no doubts leads the way; but Baudelaire's taste for putrefaction, genuine though it be, here serves ironically only to rescue the all-too perishable beauty of the world from its destruction, and thus testifies, in a way by no means exceeding the Horatian *aere perennius*, to the imperishable splendour of his verse: it is the poet who can exclaim 'j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine / De mes amours décomposés [*I have kept the divine form and essence / of my decomposed loves*]' (Baudelaire 1963: 47, 46).

In Rimbaud's *Venus Anadyomène*, on the contrary, it is not in contrast with and in spite of the irredeemable corruption of the world but precisely in and through it that the poet touches the divine. Not only does this invert the hierarchy of what perishes and what is eternal in beauty,

but it does so not incidentally but by usurping both the most classical of images of the beautiful  
— Aphrodite herself rising from the sea — and the most classical of verse forms, the sonnet:

Venus Anadyomène

Comme d'un cercueil vert en fer blanc, une tête  
De femme à cheveux bruns fortement pommadés  
D'une vieille baignoire émerge, lente et bête,  
Avec des déficits assez mal ravaudés;

Puis le col gras et gris, les larges omoplates  
Qui saillent; le dos court qui rentre et qui ressort;  
Puis les rondeurs des reins semblent prendre l'essor;  
La graisse sous la peau paraît en feuilles plates:

L'échine est un peu rouge, et le tout sent un goût  
Horrible étrangement; on remarque surtout  
Des singularités qu'il faut voir à la loupe...

Les reins portent deux mots gravés: CLARA VENUS;  
—Et tout ce corps remue et tend sa large croupe  
Belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus (Rimbaud 2005: 24).<sup>4</sup>

*[As from a green zinc coffin, a woman's  
Head with brown hair heavily pomaded  
Emerges slowly and stupidly from an old bathtub,  
With bald patches rather badly hidden;*

*Then the fat gray neck, broad shoulder-blades  
Sticking out; a short back which curves in and bulges;  
Then the roundness of the buttocks seems to take off;  
The fat under the skin appears in slabs:*

*The spine is a bit red; and the whole thing has a smell  
Strangely horrible; you notice especially  
Odd details you'd have to see with a magnifying glass...*

*The buttocks bear two engraved words: CLARA VENUS;  
—And that whole body moves and extends its broad rump  
Hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus (Rimbaud 2005: 25).]*

Crucial for grasping what is at stake here is that Rimbaud's poem, though clearly the inversion of a long poetic and pictorial tradition, cannot be assimilated into the non-threatening form of a mere parody. Rimbaud lampoons the sonnet form, but he was certainly not the first to do so — the anti-Petrarchan sonnet is almost as old as its Petrarchan model itself;<sup>5</sup> he also lampoons a classical image: Venus rising from the sea is not merely an exemplar of beauty but erotic beauty itself in its divine form; but this divinity is not so much questioned as underlined by the horrifying fascination the spectacle of disgust provides.

<sup>4</sup> *Venus Anadyomène* was written in 1870.

<sup>5</sup> For example, this had already been done by none other than the man who first introduced the sonnet in French poetry, Clément Marot, roughly a contemporary of Rabelais. Indeed, outside of the sonnet form, Marot is more than happy to put his *blason* 'Du beau tétin' alongside its counterpart 'Du laid tétin'. Faced, in the latter, with a hideous nipple, the poet begs that he's not made to vomit: 'Laissez le là, ventre Saint Georges, / Vous me fairiez rendre ma gorge [Leave off, by the belly of St. George! / You'll make my stomach heave]' (Marot 2007: I, 454-56 [author's translation]).

What is at stake in Rimbaud is something altogether different from a mere negative counterpart of a nevertheless enduringly dominant idea of beauty; it is rather the brutal assertion that the disgusting is no less radiantly present in the aesthetic, that its force in all its repugnance not only equals but outdoes that of the merely beautiful. As Adorno comments:

Die harmonistische [denn Gleichgewicht-in-Spannung] Ansicht vom Häßlichen ist in der Moderne zu Protest gegangen. Ein qualitativ neues wird daraus. Die Anatomiegreuel bei Rimbaud und Benn, das physisch Widerwärtige und Abstoßende bei Beckett, die skatologischen Züge mancher zeitgenössischen Dramen haben mit der Bauernderbheit holländischer Bilder des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts nichts mehr gemein. Das anale Vergnügen und der Stolz der Kunst, überlegen es einzuverleiben, dankt ab; im Häßlichen kapituliert das Formgesetz als ohnmächtig (Adorno 1984: 75).

*[The harmonistic conception of the ugly [i.e. the ugly as a counterpoint moment in the appearance of the beautiful] has been revoked in modernity. It becomes something qualitatively new. The horrors of anatomy in Rimbaud and Benn, the physically repugnant and repulsive in Beckett, the scatological traits of much contemporary drama have nothing in common any longer with the peasant coarseness of Dutch images of the seventeenth century. Anal pleasure and the pride art took in being able to incorporate it resign their task; faced with the ugly, the law of form surrenders in powerlessness (Adorno 2002: 46).]*

But if this is true, Rimbaud's poem no longer merely represents an aesthetic event. Where the sensuous appearance of the idea fails as a form of construction of our self-knowledge as free and reconciled with the world, it must on Idealist grounds be the Idea itself that has failed. That freedom as part of a harmonious and moral whole which the experience of beauty promised is not achieved; it is unmasked as violent caprice, unrecognised and unreconciled, the ground on which the light of beauty is built and which threatens at all times to re-emerge from its hiding place and engulf the world.

Why is it, however, we may ask in conclusion, that if ugliness, understood not merely as a contained moment in the manifestation of the beautiful but as an autonomous force in its own right which breaks through attempts at its dialectical neutralisation, poses a deadly threat to the reformulation of Idealist aesthetics which Rosenkranz undertakes, why is it that, if this is the case, it should be particularly in the guise of the disgusting that this autonomous force manifests itself most strongly and clearly? It was shown earlier that the schemata of Rosenkranz's thought lead him to deny the disgusting any link to the sublime; it is opposed not to the nobly and divinely radiant but to beauty in its merely pleasant and pleasurable shape. This Rimbaud's darkly fascinating goddess unmask as an error or, perhaps worse, a self-comforting illusion. But in what does the sublimity of disgust reside?

Adorno, who broadly speaks here of the ugly, but whose remarks on the scatologically and anatomically repugnant are for all that unambiguously angled at the disgusting, hints that 'the law of form surrenders in powerlessness'. Despite Rosenkranz's attempt at re-absorbing the sublime under the beautiful, it is clear that the sublime even in its positive form in Kantian

aesthetics is precisely that which refuses form, because it exceeds any boundary of conceivability. Yet the disgusting such as it is encountered here is of a modality which radically diverges from that of the raging waves of the dark sea or that of the brooding height of mountains. For the disgusting manifests itself in, or in reference to, what Idealist aesthetics exalts as the highest form for the work of art to take: the human body, seen as the sensuous appearance of spirit in its sovereign freedom. It is not the merely ugly body, the lame Hephaestus, at whose hobbling about the gods erupt in mirth and forget their strife, but the sublimely disgusting refusal of form we find in the diseased, broken, and putrid body and the excretions it leaks forth which most fundamentally subverts the idea of sovereignly free spirit in the sensuous realm.

If this be so, then the visceral fascination which accompanies disgust lies perhaps in the unspoken, unconscious realisation it provokes that, for all human pretention to rise above the chaotic maelstrom of the material world, our sheer corporality is not so easily laid aside; try as we might, it will not cease from revolting against our sovereignty, and makes a mockery of it by reminding us of a truth we cannot disavow: *tat tvam asi* – that thou art.

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