Aesthetic Disgust?

JENEFER ROBINSON

Une Charogne
— *Charles Baudelaire*

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.

doi:10.1017/S1358246114000253 ©The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2014

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève
Seulement par le souvenir.

Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un oeil fâché,
Epiant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.

— Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
À cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

Oui! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Apres les derniers sacrements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

A Carcass

My love, do you recall the object which we saw,
That fair, sweet, summer morn!
At a turn in the path a foul carcass
On a gravel strewn bed,

Its legs raised in the air, like a lustful woman,
Burning and dripping with poisons,
Displayed in a shameless, nonchalant way
Its belly, swollen with gases.

The sun shone down upon that putrescence,
As if to roast it to a turn,
And to give back a hundredfold to great Nature
The elements she had combined;

And the sky was watching that superb cadaver
Blossom like a flower.
So frightful was the stench that you believed
You'd faint away upon the grass.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The blow-flies were buzzing round that putrid belly,
From which came forth black battalions
Of maggots, which oozed out like a heavy liquid
All along those living tatters.

All this was descending and rising like a wave,
Or poured out with a crackling sound;
One would have said the body, swollen with a vague breath,
Lived by multiplication.

And this world gave forth singular music,
Like running water or the wind,
Or the grain that winnowers with a rhythmic motion
Shake in their winnowing baskets.

The forms disappeared and were no more than a dream,
A sketch that slowly falls
Upon the forgotten canvas, that the artist
Completes from memory alone.

Crouched behind the boulders, an anxious dog
Watched us with angry eye,
Waiting for the moment to take back from the carcass
The morsel [s]he had left.

— And yet you will be like this corruption,
Like this horrible infection,
Star of my eyes, sunlight of my being,
You, my angel and my passion!

Yes! thus will you be, queen of the Graces,
After the last sacraments,
When you go beneath grass and luxuriant flowers,
To molder among the bones of the dead.

Then, O my beauty! say to the worms who will
Devour you with kisses,
That I have kept the form and the divine essence
Of my decomposed love!

— William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)[1]

[1] English translation by William Aggeler, used by permission of Geoffrey Aggeler.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jenefer Robinson

Introduction

In paragraph 48 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant claimed that 'only one kind of ugliness cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence artistic beauty, namely that which arouses disgust.' However, from Baudelaire to Damien Hirst, there have been artists who delight in arousing disgust through their works, and many of these disgusting works, such as Baudelaire's *Une Charogne*, have high aesthetic merit.[2] In her splendid new book, *Savoring Disgust*, Carolyn Korsmeyer rejects Kant's suggestion and argues that there is something called 'aesthetic disgust,' that is, 'the arousal of disgust in an audience, a spectator, or a reader, under circumstances where that emotion both apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a component of appreciation.'[3]

Although Kant rejects the disgusting as too unpleasant to be a source of beauty, he acknowledges that the sublime depends upon displeasure, although ultimately it induces a kind of *respect* for the human rational faculty of free will.[4] Similarly, Edmund Burke wrote that 'the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is *Astonishment*,' which is 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror,' although the 'inferior effects' of the sublime are 'admiration, reverence and respect.'[5] These remarks by Kant and Burke suggest that there is a paradox of the sublime: the experience of the sublime includes respect and admiration but depends essentially on less pleasant emotions. Similarly, Hume identifies a paradox of tragedy, noting that 'it

[2] Many thanks to Julien Zanetta at the University of Geneva for introducing me to this disgusting poem.

[3] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 88.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), Paragraph 27, p. 141. In his introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* Paul Guyer describes the 'displeasure' associated with the mathematical sublime as 'frustration at the inability of the understanding to grasp an absolute whole.' p. xxxi. With respect to the dynamical sublime it is displeasure at the realization of our 'insignificance in relation to' the 'vast forces in nature.' ibid.

[5] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* ed. J. T. Boulton (Prairie State Books, 1993), Part 2, section 1, p. 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy,' adding that paradoxically 'the more [the spectators] are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle.'[6] At a less exalted level, Noël Carroll has discussed the paradox of horror, why it is that people enjoy horror movies and novels despite – or even because of – their horrific content.[7] Korsmeyer christens these paradoxes 'paradoxes of aversion,' and she includes in this category a paradox of disgust.[8] After all, many people actively enjoy disgusting movies, photographs, paintings, sculptures, poems and so on. And even if most disgusting movies do not rise to the level of great art, there are paintings by Goya and Francis Bacon, poems by Baudelaire, and many contemporary artworks – films, photography and installation artworks – which do.

Traditionally the paradoxes of aversion have been articulated as paradoxes about aesthetic pleasure in, enjoyment of, or positive emotional reactions towards subject-matter that is fearsome or terrible (the sublime), deeply sorrowful – pitiable and frightening – (tragedy) or horrific (horror).[9] By analogy, the paradox of disgust can be expressed as the paradox that sometimes people take pleasure in or have a positive emotional experience of works of art that are disgusting.[10] In this paper, I will argue that, although the disgust that an artwork arouses is sometimes outweighed by some other more

[6] David Hume, 'Of Tragedy' in Eileen John and Dominic Lopes eds., *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 25.

[7] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 10.

[8] Sometimes Korsmeyer uses the phrase 'paradoxes of aversion' for all these paradoxes e.g. *Savoring Disgust* p. 40 and p. 72. Sometimes she confines its use to what I am calling 'the paradox of disgust' e.g. p. 11.

[9] Notice that the appropriate response to all three includes varieties of fear. Burke defines the sublime as arousing fear. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, should arouse (a catharsis of) pity and fear. And, according to Carroll, 'art-horror' is a blend of fear and disgust. If we think of disgust as a special kind of fear – fear of contamination or fear of death and disintegration – then all the paradoxes of aversion involve fear. But, as we will see later, the mechanisms of disgust and fear are quite different.

[10] This can also happen in ordinary life. See, for example, Matthew Kieran's discussion of gurning competitions in which the challenge is to 'pull the most distorted and ugly faces possible,' *Revealing Art*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

positive or pleasant emotion, to the extent that disgusting artworks are disgusting, they *cannot* be sources of pleasure, because the characteristic elicitors of disgust and feelings of disgust are deeply unpleasant. For the same reason, disgust cannot *convert* into an 'aesthetic attraction' or change its valence, as Korsmeyer claims. Furthermore, there is no special emotion of 'aesthetic disgust.' It's just that sometimes disgust, like other negative emotions, can be a source of insight, and thus indirectly contribute to aesthetic appreciation. *Une Charogne* is an excellent example, and I will conclude the paper with an analysis of this great but disgusting poem.

Implicit in my argument is the methodological claim that solving – or dissolving – the paradox of disgust requires not only (1) conceptual analysis of what the paradox is and critical assessment of the various suggested solutions to it, and (2) interpretation of specific disgusting artworks, but also (3) attention to the relevant empirical facts, in this case, facts about disgust. I therefore begin with a brief sketch of the science of disgust.

Disgust as a Basic Emotion

Disgust is widely agreed to be a *basic* emotion, an emotion common to all cultures, even though cultures differ greatly in how many and which non-basic emotions they recognize.[11] Certain emotions are thought to be *biologically* basic in that they develop in all normal functioning human beings. The psychologist Paul Ekman, following Darwin, describes basic emotions as pan-cultural emotions with distinctive facial and vocal expressions as well as distinctive action tendencies and physiology, which 'evolved for their adaptive value in dealing with fundamental life tasks,' such as losses (sadness), offenses (anger), and threats (fear).[12] Different cultures may regard different

[11] According to the main contemporary experts on disgust, Paul Rozin and his colleagues, 'disgust is on almost every list of basic emotions that has at least four emotions in it, from Darwin onwards.' Paul Rozin et al, 'Disgust,' in Michael Lewis and Jeannette Haviland-Jones eds., *Handbook of Emotions* 2nd edn., 2000 (London: Guilford), p. 638.

[12] Paul Ekman, 'An Argument for Basic Emotions,' *Cognition and Emotion* **6**/3–4 (1992), p. 171. See also Ekman's *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), and Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A perceptual theory of emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2004), especially pp. 86–97, 110–115. The basic emotion approach has its critics. In particular, James Russell and Lisa Feldman-Barrett deny the existence of basic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

specific things as losses but everyone responds to what they appraise as a loss in the same way: with the facial and vocal expressions and physiological symptoms characteristic of sadness. Ekman's defense of basic emotions originated in his discovery of pan-cultural facial expressions for certain emotions such as sadness, happiness, anger, fear, surprise, and … disgust.[13]

Confirmation that disgust is biologically basic comes from those who lack a functioning disgust system and have characteristic neurological deficits. Huntingdon's disease affects the striatum, a region of the basal ganglia, and people with HD have been found to be impaired with respect to recognition of facial expressions of disgust. Moreover, if you have 'the HD mutation,' you have a disgust impairment even before any HD symptoms have emerged. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and Tourette's Syndrome also show 'marked impairments in recognizing facial expressions of disgust' but people with Tourette's only show this impairment if they also have obsessive-compulsive symptoms. It seems that 'the presence of OCD' is 'a defining feature of the disgust deficit.'[14] As with some other emotions, losing one's ability to *recognize* disgust in other people's faces is correlated with the ability to *experience* disgust. Hence there seems to be a 'genuine emotion-specific deficit' for disgust.[15]

---

emotions and defend a 'dimensional' approach, according to which all emotions have dimensions such as valence and arousal, but specific emotions are 'configurations constructed on the fly out of more fundamental ingredients,' James Russell, 'Core Affect and the Psychological Construction of Emotion,' *Psychological Review* **110**/1 (2003), p. 167. Dimensional theorists tend to be impressed by the great number and variety of emotions in different cultures, whereas basic emotion theorists are more struck by the commonalities among emotions in different cultures and even among other animals. I do not have space here to adjudicate this dispute here. Suffice to say that the basic emotion approach is in my view for many reasons more plausible than its rivals.

[13] Ekman's list of basic emotions has varied over the years, but he has consistently classified these six emotions as basic. It is probable that further basic emotions will be confirmed, especially if we consider criteria for basicness other than facial expression. Affiliation or love would be one plausible candidate.

[14] Andrew Calder et al, 'The Neuropsychology of Fear and Loathing,' *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* **2** (2001), pp. 359.

[15] Another of Ekman's proposed criteria for the basic emotions is that they are emotions that we share with other primates, or some other primates, or more generally with animals lower down the phylogenetic scale. This is more controversial with respect to disgust. There is evidence that both

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jesse Prinz argues that basic emotions are also *psychologically* basic in the sense that they contain 'no other emotions as parts,' or, more generally, are 'not *derived* from another emotion.'[16] Thus unlike anger, fear, and sadness, jealousy would appear to be psychologically non-basic in that it is constructed *out of* anger and/or sadness, and/or fear. Prinz thinks disgust is a psychologically basic emotion since 'there is no obvious account of how it might be built up from other affective states that are more basic.'[17] Furthermore, disgust can serve as a building block for other more complex emotions. Noël Carroll, for example, has identified *horror* with a mixture of disgust and fear.[18] Later we will see that in our culture disgust can also mix with positive emotions such as amusement, although it is not hard to conceive of cultures in which the disgusting would never be amusing.

Perhaps it might be objected that disgust is a variety of *fear* – since fear of *contamination* is often cited as at the root of disgust. However, Andrew Calder and his colleagues have shown that the neural circuitry for disgust and fear is significantly different.[19] So even if disgust is (from the point of view of 'conceptual analysis') a variety of fear, it is a distinct variety and uses distinct neural mechanisms. Whereas fear has been linked to the amygdala, the amygdala has rarely been reported as a neural correlate for

---

monkeys and small children (under the age of 3–4) experience and express distaste, as in aversion to a bitter or a sour taste, but that they do not recognize the full range of elicitors or exhibit the full range of physiological symptoms of mature human disgust. In *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (MIT Press, 2011) Daniel Kelly argues that the reason why human disgust is peculiar to human beings is that in humans – unlike other species with only the 'distaste' mechanism – there is not one mechanism but two different ones which, as he puts it, have become 'entangled' over the course of evolution to produce modern human disgust. However, as I explain shortly, I find it more plausible that disgust probably originated as having a simple set of elicitors, shared by humans and other primates, but that in humans it evolved by expanding its elicitors, in the way characteristic of other emotions.

[16] Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, pp. 87–88.

[17] Jesse Prinz, 'Disgust as a Basic Emotion,' *Emotion Researcher*, **16**/4 (2002), pp. 7–8. But Prinz does not agree entirely with Ekman's list of basic emotions.

[18] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 28.

[19] Calder et al., 'Neuropsychology of Fear and Loathing,' *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* **2** (2001), pp. 352–363.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recognizing disgust expressions or for appraisals that something is disgusting.[20] However, all the fMRI imaging studies of people viewing disgust expressions have implicated the insula and the basal ganglia nuclei, especially the putamen and the pallidum. Interestingly, the anterior insulate cortex is sometimes referred to on independent grounds as the gustatory cortex, which is 'active in processing offensive tastes in both humans and other primates.'[21] Moreover, electrical stimulation of the insula in conscious human beings (who were undergoing surgery) produced 'sensations of nausea, unpleasant tastes and sensations in the stomach.'[22] Crudely put, because the neural mechanisms for fear and disgust are distinct, the emotions themselves are distinct, and disgust cannot contain fear as a 'part.' All the so-called 'negative emotions' are *aversions* of some kind or another, but there are different types of 'basic' aversion. As we will see, disgust is distinctive insofar as it focuses specifically on contaminants rather than other types of danger.

Analyzing Disgust

Emotions are processes, which are initiated by an 'appraisal' of the world that (1) presents some situation, event or person as vitally significant in some distinctive way to my survival and/or well-being or that of my 'group,' and that (2) instantly readies the person or animal to deal with the situation, event or person, as so appraised, in a fast and automatic way, by generating autonomic nervous system changes, hormonal changes, postures, gestures, and action tendencies. Specific facial and vocal expressions are also generated, which communicate the emotion to conspecifics and can sometimes alert them to the situation that caused it. (3) Emotions then typically motivate more reflective monitoring or 'regulation' of the emotion, including strategies for *coping* with the situation as appraised. Finally, (4) in human beings the physiological changes induced are often experienced as emotional feelings, which may provide further - conscious - information about the

[20] But compare David Sander who identifies the amygdala as a general *relevance detector*. See David Sander et al, 'The Amygdala: An Evolved System for Relevance Detection' *Reviews in the Neurosciences* **14** (2003), pp. 303–316. But in this article disgust is not explicitly referenced.

[21] Kelly, *Yuck*! p. 17.

[22] Calder et al, 'Neuropsychology of Fear and Loathing,' p. 359.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

situation.[23] Basic emotions, such as disgust, can be characterized in terms of relatively distinctive appraisals, action tendencies, physiological changes, expressions, and emotional feelings.

(1) The emotional appraisal of disgust

What is the 'fundamental life task' – what the psychologist Richard Lazarus calls the 'core relational theme' – that disgust evolved to deal with?[24] There is wide – although not universal – agreement that disgust evolved to begin with as a defense against eating poisonous food. Paul Rozin and his colleagues, borrowing from Darwin and from the psychoanalyst Andras Anygal, have identified what they call 'core disgust' as 'revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object.' They then identify these 'offensive objects' as 'contaminants;' that is, 'if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable.'[25] The fear of *ingesting* a contaminant is clearly very powerful, witness some well-known experiments conducted by Rozin, in which, for example, people refuse to drink from a brand new bedpan or to drink milk in which a sterilized cockroach is gently floating. Both bedpans and cockroaches in their different ways come into contact with things that are among the most central cases of disgust: feces, urine, dirt and disease.[26]

It seems likely, however, that disgust does not always focus on 'oral incorporation,' or contamination via the mouth, but extends to smells and olfactory incorporation, as well as to the sense of touch. Robert Plutchik sees disgust as originating as a defense against

[23] I am here defining *episodes* of emotion, rather than long-standing traits or dispositions. See also *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford University Press, 2005), especially chs. 1–3, where I defend a similar account.

[24] Lazarus himself suggests that the universal theme for disgust is: 'Taking in or being too close to an indigestible object or idea (metaphorically speaking),' which is not very perspicuous. See Richard Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 122.

[25] Paul Rozin et al, 'Disgust,' p. 637. In this passage they quote from Paul Rozin and April Fallon, 'A Perspective on Disgust' *Psychological Review* **94**/1 (1987), p. 23.

[26] Rozin et al, 'Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **50**/4 (1986), pp. 703–712.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disease and infection, with *the skin* as its main medium.[27] Similarly, Judith Toronchuk and George Ellis observe that 'avoiding contact with infectious substances provides greater safety than merely avoiding ingestion.' They propose that 'touch, olfaction, and taste were all involved in the evolutionary development of the DISGUST system, as early aquatic vertebrates likely had, in common with many modern fish, widespread chemoreceptors on their body surface, an adaptation that allows not only avoidance of ingestion but even earlier avoidance of contact with infectious or noxious substances.'[28] In general, it is widely agreed that, although disgust may have originated as a distaste response, it then expanded to cover many other elicitors, so that today there is 'a qualitative difference' between distaste and disgust: they 'now constitute distinct psychological categories.'[29] Moreover, the way that, according to this story, a 'primitive' emotional response expands to take on more and different elicitors is typical of emotions in general, and not peculiar to disgust.

In earlier work Rozin and his colleagues focused on animals and meat as the elicitor category of core disgust, but more recently they have proposed that the fundamental elicitor of disgust is not food or animals but rather 'reminders of our animal vulnerability.'[30] Anything that reminds us of our 'fragile body envelopes' and the inevitability of death is a potential disgust elicitor: at heart disgust is 'a defense against a universal fear of death.' Disgust is the 'body and soul emotion:' insofar as humans behave like animals, 'the distinction between human and animals is blurred, and we see ourselves as

[27] Robert Plutchik, *Emotion: A Psychoevolutionary Synthesis* (NewYork: Harper and Row, 1980).

[28] Judith Toronchuk and George Ellis, 'Disgust: Sensory affect or primary emotional system?' *Cognition and Emotion* **21**/8 (2007), p. 1802. Toronchuk and Ellis cite Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran as arguing for the 'evolutionary origins [of disgust] in more general protection of organisms from infection' (ibid., 1801). This hypothesis is supported by a 'massive international survey that disgust is universally elicited by disease-salient contact stimuli such as bodily secretions, viscous substances, vermin, and sick or dirty people' (ibid., 1801). Likewise, in his discussion of disgust Steven Pinker comments that 'feces, carrion, and soft, wet animal parts are home to harmful microorganisms and ought to be kept outside the body.' *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997) p. 382.

[29] Rozin et al, 'Disgust,' p. 639. Toronchuk and Ellis agree. See 'Disgust: Sensory affect or primary emotional system,' pp. 1800–1802. Compare Kelly, *Yuck!* who argues that disgust and distaste are distinct but became 'entangled' over the course of evolution.

[30] Rozin et al, 'Disgust,' p. 642.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lowered, debased, and (perhaps most critically) mortal.'[31] Dan Kelly christens this theory the 'terror management theory' of disgust.[32]

Paul Bloom rightly argues that Rozin's theory 'misses the physicality, the sensuality, of disgust.'[33] It is not death that's disgusting but rotting corpses. Likewise William Miller points out that the animals that disgust us do not disgust us because they are animals – lots of animals are not disgusting at all – but because they have characteristics that we find disgusting, such as sliminess. Disgusting animals remind us of the cycle of generation and decay, in other words *of life,* 'oozy, slimy, viscous, teeming, messy, uncanny life.'[34] For Miller 'the central themes of disgust elicitation [are] the eternal recurrence of viscous, teeming, swarming generation and the putrefaction and decay that attend it.'[35] In other words, Rozin may have been closer to the truth in his earlier work: the characteristic appraisal in disgust – its core relational theme – seems to be that something is *putrid* and *tainted*, *contaminated* and *contaminating*.[36] Confirmation for this view comes from the fact that *pan-cultural* elicitors for disgust include disintegrating corpses or carrion, 'violations of the body envelope' such as feces, blood, vomit, pus, oozing sores, spittle, snot, and so on, all potentially infectious, disease-carrying substances.[37]

[31] Ibid.

[32] Kelly, *Yuck!* p. 44.

[33] Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby* (London: Heinemann, 2004), p. 171. Korsmeyer (personal communication) points out that according to the 'the embodied appraisal' approach to disgust, 'this 'conceptual' recognition is achieved by means of the automatic reaction of the sensual response.' Rotting corpses are not only disgusting, but also 'viscerally-arousing signals of death.'

[34] William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 50. *In Savoring Disgust* Korsmeyer defends a similar view: fundamentally what disgusts is death, but it is death appraised not as a mighty, awesome force but as the 'reduction – of [even] the noblest life to decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated' (134).

[35] Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 64.

[36] There is some dispute about the type of appraisal that sets off the emotion process. Many theorists (e.g. Robert C. Solomon and Martha Nussbaum) think that in human beings the appraisal is 'cognitive,' whereas others (e.g. Jesse Prinz and myself) think it is 'embodied' in some sense. I do not have space to discuss this issue here, but it is perhaps worth pointing out that disgust would seem to be a poster child for the 'embodied appraisal' theory, given the immediate, attention-grabbing, visceral way in which it registers its objects.

[37] Not all objects of disgust are *in fact* contaminating, just as not all objects of fear are in fact dangerous. Thus although cockroaches are bearers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2) Disgust Responses

A typical expression of disgust includes 'the facial movements that precede or accompany retching, the behavior from which the expression is thought to derive.'[38] Darwin says that 'moderate disgust' can be expressed by the 'gape face': 'the mouth being widely opened, as if to let an offensive morsel drop out; by spitting, by blowing out of the protruded lips, or by a sound as of clearing the throat' (Ach or Agh). 'Extreme disgust is expressed by movements around the mouth identical to those preparatory to vomiting.'[39] And sometimes of course the extreme disgust reaction is simply to vomit. But a typical expression of disgust also includes a pronounced nose wrinkle, which suggests that disgust responds also to noxious smells.[40] Ekman thinks there are two distinct facial expressions for disgust, 'nose wrinkling and raised upper lip,' which often occur together: possibly the two expressions originated in disgusting tastes and smells respectively. Moreover, skin-crawling would seem to be a disgust reaction centered on touch.

As for autonomic responses, disgust, unlike sadness, fear or anger, produces a (slightly) lowered heart rate and shows other signs of parasympathetic activation 'which plays a broadly inhibitory role in the functioning of the organism.'[41] The disgust response is typically an immediate and visceral *withdrawal* reaction.

---

of disease, slugs are presumably no more contaminating than ladybugs, although far more disgusting. Moreover, human disgust often expands its elicitors to other people, who are thus appraised as dirty and contaminating, as violating purity norms. William Miller studies the way that disgust marks out social hierarchies: the low tend to be equated with the dirty and disgusting; after all they do the dirty and disgusting jobs. According to Martha Nussbaum, in her study of the horrendous events in Gujurat in 2002, interpersonal disgust is a typical accompaniment of genocide. Appraising other groups of people or individuals as 'disgusting' is a motivator to crush or exterminate them as one would a cockroach, which, incidentally, was the term of choice for the Hutu when describing the Tutsi during the 1994 Rwanda genocide. See her *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[38] Kelly, *Yuck!* p. 16.

[39] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. Paul Ekman, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 256.

[40] Ekman, *Emotions Revealed*, p. 184.

[41] Daniel Kelly, *Yuck*! p.16. See Robert Levenson on autonomic differences among emotions in Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson eds., *The Nature of Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 255–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(3) Monitoring the Disgust Response

The initial emotional appraisal of CONTAMINATED, although difficult to eliminate or moderate, at least in extreme cases, can, like other emotions, be regulated to some degree, but once disgust has become a bodily habit, it is very difficult to eradicate. Disgust has its coping strategies: if we are nauseated by something, we may need to focus our attention elsewhere or try to regestalt what we are seeing or smelling as something benign. However, the fact that this is so difficult to do may be why disgust is an especially recalcitrant emotion.

(4) Feelings of Disgust

Bodily feelings of disgust are visceral feelings of nausea (wanting to vomit or actually vomiting), and more or less violent feelings of withdrawal, of action tendencies to escape the noxious smells, tastes, sights and feels that have invaded one's senses, by expelling or eliminating their source. We wash our hands after inadvertently touching a slug, or tending someone's carbuncle. We throw up whatever tastes disgusting, and we move away as fast we can from disgusting smells. Jonathan Haidt writes that all disgust includes a motivation to 'avoid, expel, or otherwise break off contact with the offending entity, often coupled to a motivation to wash, purify, or otherwise remove residues of any physical contact that was made with the entity.'[42] This is clearly adaptive with respect to bacterial contamination of foods, but it is also a reaction to *moral* turpitude (for example, people react with disgust if asked to wear Hitler's – newly cleaned – sweater).

In general, disgust functions like other basic emotions, in that a simple and relatively stereotyped set of responses is elicited by a core relational theme, which I have identified as the 'contaminated and putrid,' with a universal elicitor being the cycle of life – of generation and decay – and in particular the decaying human body after death when consciousness and humanity have been eliminated. This core relational theme is then extended to other people, actions, and objects that are appraised as contaminating.

[42] Jonathan Haidt, 'The Moral Emotions,' in Richard J. Davidson et al eds., *Handbook of Affective Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 857.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Proposed Solutions to the Paradox of Disgust

We have seen that the object of disgust is the contaminated and/or putrid and that the characteristic *feelings* of disgust include feelings of nausea, and/or of wanting to violently *withdraw from* the disgusting object. In view of this analysis of disgust, there certainly does seem to be a paradox of disgust: how can such an unpleasant emotion contribute in any way to pleasurable aesthetic experiences? Broadly speaking, there are four main species of suggested solution to the various paradoxes of aversion, which I will attempt to apply to the paradox of disgust. Like Korsmeyer, I believe that there is a great variety of disgusting artworks and no one-size-fits-all solution to the 'paradox of disgust.' Mere 'entertainments' such as gross-out movies, need to be treated differently from works of 'high' art, such as Baudelaire's poem, *Une Charogne*. However, some of the suggested solutions do not work well even for works of 'low' art.

(1) The 'Pleasurable Disgust' Solution

One suggested solution is that there is *a special kind of pleasurable disgust*. The idea that disgust can be pleasurable in the right circumstances takes at least three forms.

(i) 'Pleasurable disgust' might be disgust that is under our *contro*l. Marcia Eaton argues that 'we seek out tragedies (and other art works) in the belief that a *controlled experience* (my italics) will excite, enrich, purge and/or sensitize us in certain ways, and we take genuine pleasure in this experience.'[43] Similarly, perhaps, with respect to disgust: if we are engaged with a disgusting artwork, we are in control of our disgust and it is therefore not unpleasant: after all, it is up to us whether we continue to engage with the disgusting artwork or not.

This proposed solution seems to me to be a non-starter. First, the proposed solution does not explain why controlled disgust would bring positive pleasure rather than merely a lessening of the displeasure that disgust normally brings. It certainly does not explain why we

[43] Marcia Eaton, 'A Strange Kind of Sadness,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **41**/1 (1982), p. 60. Similarly, John Morreall has stressed that, like fear on a roller-coaster (for those who feel in control in such situations), fear of a monster in a horror movie can be pleasant because 'we retain overall control of the situation' insofar as we know it is only a fiction: we can 'snap out of it' if we so desire. John Morreall, 'Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fiction,' *Philosophy and Literature* **9**/1 (1985), p. 97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would seek out disgusting art rather than art with a more benign subject-matter. Secondly, even when the disgust reaction is in our control, insofar as we can leave the movie or stop reading the poem whenever we like, as long as we are actually engaged with the movie or poem, and we are experiencing disgust, the experience is going to be, to that extent, an unpleasant one.

(ii) A second version of the *pleasurable disgust view* suggests that disgust can be pleasant when it is a special kind of *distanced* disgust. Edward Bullough famously described the 'aesthetic attitude' as the result of a psychological act of 'distancing:' when we are focused on the aesthetic aspects of a situation, we put ourselves 'out of gear' with the practical aspects of the situation and focus on its purely aesthetic qualities.[44] So perhaps when encountering a disgusting work of art or an artistic representation of something disgusting, we can distance ourselves from its practical implications so that we do not respond as we would in a disgusting real-life situation. But disgust is difficult, if not impossible, to 'put at a distance:' one can try to redirect one's attention, but if the disgusting taste or smell or sight or touch is salient enough, it will inevitably invade one's consciousness. George Dickie argues persuasively that the so-called act of 'distancing' is simply a matter of refocusing one's attention.[45] But when there is a stinking animal carcass in front of us in the road (or being vividly described to us by Baudelaire), it is hard, if not impossible, for most of us to simply ignore it.

(iii) A third version of the *pleasurable disgust view*, which has recently been revived by Nico Frijda and Louise Sundarajaran, holds that in aesthetic experience one experiences only a *refined* version of the emotions.[46] This often goes along with the idea that in aesthetic experience one savors the emotional (aesthetic) quality, such as the sadness of a piece of music, rather than reacting as one would to a genuinely sad situation in real life. But however plausible this view might be for sadness, it clearly will not do for disgust: savoring the disgusting – reveling in the disgusting smell or taste or touch –

[44] Edward Bullough, 'Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,' reprinted in Morris Weitz ed. Problems in Aesthetics, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 782–92.

[45] George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude,' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **1**/1 (1964), pp. 56–65.

[46] Nico Frijda and Louise Sundarajaran, 'Emotion Refinement: A theory inspired by Chinese Poetics,' *Perspectives on Psychological Science* **2**/3 (2007), pp. 227–241.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems to be possible only for those who enjoy the pleasures of deviance (such as, perhaps, Baudelaire).[47]

The 'pleasurable disgust' solution is highly implausible in all three versions. As we have seen, disgust is a basic emotion and its universal core relational theme is *contamination*. There is nothing pleasant about this. Likewise, the disgust *response* is to (tend to) vomit or spit up (something appraised as noxious), to purify ourselves, to close off the nostrils, and, in general, to refuse – with more or less violence – access by the noxious substance to any of our senses. The feelings of these visceral reactions are correspondingly unpleasant and seem to be designed to bring to conscious awareness first the visceral rejection response and second the presence of the noxious substance that caused it.

It seems to me that distancing, savoring, and controlling disgust are not *types of disgust* but rather potential modes of 'cognitive coping' with disgust.[48] As is the case with any emotion, we can try to 'distance' ourselves from the disgusting object or scene by focusing on other aspects of the situation, or we can try to control our response by 'regestalting' the situation if we can. But as a matter of fact, this is particularly difficult with respect to disgust. All emotions capture our attention, but disgust does so in a particularly visceral and unpleasant way. As for 'savoring disgust,' we could in theory try to change our focus from the disgusting object itself and onto its sensory properties, its look, smell, taste, or feel. But, again, this strategy will not work very well with respect to disgust, since disgust is primarily induced by smells, tastes, sights and feels.[49]

[47] The title of Korsmeyer's book is *Savoring Disgust*, and she suggests that we do savor the disgusting in certain foods, as when we notice the faint taste of urine in kidneys, but in her examples of this sort the disgust is always mild. As we will see later, she also argues that sometimes disgust *converts* into pleasure – and hence presumably can be savored. I will argue against this particular claim.

[48] This term is derived from Richard Lazarus who has identified several '*cognitive coping* strategies,' which do not actually change anything in the relationship between a person and his or her environment but instead 'change its *meaning*, and therefore the emotional reaction' (Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation*, p. 112). For example, 'if we successfully avoid thinking about a threat, the anxiety associated with it is postponed. And if we successfully deny that anything is wrong, there is no reason to experience the emotion appropriate to the particular threat or harm' (ibid.).

[49] Of course disgust responds not just to nasty smells, feels, and so on, but also e.g. to people who are appraised as having other 'disgusting'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2) The Weighting View

One advantage of examining the nature of disgust before considering disgust in aesthetic contexts is that it allows us to rule out all the proffered solutions to the paradox of disgust that imply that somehow disgust itself can be pleasurable. The second type of solution, which I call *the weighting view*, is more successful, however, in that it does, I think, explain some instances of the paradox. This view recognizes that disgust is an unpleasant emotion, but it explains the paradox of disgust by saying that the unpleasant disgust reaction is *outweighed* by some other pleasant experience that the disgusting artwork affords. Loosely speaking, there are at least four versions of the weighting view. (i) Disgust can be outweighed by pleasure in the form or structure of a work; (ii) more generally, the disgusting quality of an artwork can be outweighed by some more enjoyable property that it also possesses; (iii) the disgust evoked by a work can be outweighed by the satisfaction we take in being the sort of person who can endure disgust; or (iv) the unpleasant emotion of disgust can be outweighed by a positive emotion that the artwork arouses, such as fascination or amusement.

(i) When writing about the paradox of tragedy, Hume suggests that we can take pleasure in the formal aspects of an artwork even if its subject matter is aversive: the 'force of imagination, the energy of expression, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation' are all, he says, 'of themselves delightful to the mind.'[50] Similarly, for Noël Carroll, the pleasure we get from a horror narrative is also in part pleasure in the structure of the narrative.[51]

Aristotle famously remarked that we can get pleasure from an artistic *representation* of an unpleasant object even if the object itself in real life would arouse an unpleasant reaction such as disgust. Presumably this is because we can take pleasure in how the subject matter is represented, even if the subject matter itself is disgusting. Thus, Géricault's paintings of severed heads can be enjoyed for their formal properties

---

qualities such as amputations or bodily disfigurements. Although such properties are clearly not contaminating, people with disfigurements are often, unfortunately, treated as though diseased and contagious.

[50] Hume, 'Of Tragedy,' p.27.

[51] But in *The Philosophy of Horror* Carroll emphasizes more the satisfaction of curiosity and the fascination we experience for the monsters in the horror fiction as the sources of our pleasure, which compensates for the disgust we feel for the monsters themselves.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and powerful expressiveness – the painterly style, the masterly use of color, and so on – despite their unpleasant subject matter. Korsmeyer, however, disputes this claim for disgust, arguing that disgust is 'transparent:' it automatically transfers from an object to a representation of the object.[52] Thus if we are disgusted by seeing severed heads, we will also be disgusted by seeing a clear and accurate picture of these same severed heads. Korsmeyer claims that the paradox of fiction can therefore not take hold with respect to disgusting works of art. There is no puzzle about why we react emotionally to a representation as well as to what it depicts, because both are disgusting. Even if it's 'only a picture,' the disgust response remains.

There is some truth to Korsmeyer's claim, insofar as a realistic representation of a disgusting object may well be nearly as disgusting as the object itself. But although Géricault's severed heads are relatively realistic, we can also appreciate Géricault's skill in representing them and the *style* and *expressiveness* of these paintings, qualities that severed heads in real life will normally lack. When we come to non-visual arts such as poetry, the point becomes even clearer: it is true that we are likely to be disgusted by the vivid poetic description of a carcass that we find in Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne.' But if are appreciating the poem aesthetically, we are also appreciating its formal mastery, which *outweighs* the disgust that the work also arouses. Even so, we might wonder whether the utilitarian calculus would not mandate that we engage only with formally pleasing works that are *not* disgusting.[53]

(ii)'Gross-out' movies are not notable for their formal sophistication but they may have other positive properties that outweigh – for some audiences – their disgustingness. Movies in which young men vomit after over-indulging in booze and food, or the evil slimy Blob oozes over the world lingering lovingly in people's bodily crevices do not usually lay claim to great art status, and many are aesthetically nugatory. The whole point seems to be to elicit *shock* and *disgust*. But if the main emotion induced is repulsion and if there are few redeeming aesthetic features to compensate for the repulsion, why would anyone engage with such works?

[52] Following Aurel Kolnai, Korsmeyer claims that disgust 'can be induced by the presentation of qualities alone, regardless of whether one believes in the existence of the object possessing those qualities' (*Savoring Disgust*, p. 55).

[53] The Weighting View does not seem to have a good response to this objection, but later we will see that disgust in response to an artwork can be a means of insight, in a way that no non-disgusting artwork can provide.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One plausible suggestion is that popular disgust movies are enjoyable because *transgressive*, without being threatening: in the real world we do not like watching people throwing up, but in the safe movie context audiences can enjoy feeling free from social conventions. Such movies are usually trying to push the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. Disgust has been called the 'gatekeeper emotion,'[54] which serves to help uphold our norms of civilized behavior and our purity norms.[55] Table manners, for example, have been developed partly to keep disgust at bay.[56] Some people enjoy the spectacle of the socially transgressive, especially in a safe context where no transgression actually takes place. On the other hand, many people despise such movies. This is presumably because for those audiences such movies do not provide enough – or any – compensation for their disgustingness.

(iii) Susan Feagin has proposed that the pleasure we take in tragedy is a meta-pleasure, namely pleasure that we are the sorts of people who respond to tragic events in an appropriate way.[57] Similarly, we might take pleasure in a disgusting artwork because we are pleased to be the sorts of people who can tolerate or even enjoy the disgusting, and our feelings of self-satisfaction may outweigh and compensate for the disgusting experience of the artwork itself: the overall experience is pleasant *despite* the disgust we feel. One might doubt whether Feagin's view explains the attraction of great tragedy, but it surely does help to explain the appeal of the kind of disgusting movies I am currently discussing. The psychology seems to be that if I can sit through the disgusting scenes before me, I can take satisfaction in my emotional toughness. Disgusting movies test the boundaries of our tolerance, getting us to feel not only disgust but also curiosity about what our limits are for what is socially taboo. This is not unlike what Rozin has entitled 'benign masochism:' in a safe setting we prepare ourselves to meet disgusting situations in real life.[58]

[54] Susan Miller, *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (Hillsdale NJ: Analytic Press, 2004).

[55] See also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

[56] See Shaun Nichols on etiquette books in 'On the genealogy of norms: A case for the role of emotion in cultural evolution,' *Philosophy of Science* **69** (2002), pp. 234–255.

[57] Susan Feagin, 'The Pleasures of Tragedy,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* **20**/1 (1983), pp. 75–84.

[58] See Bloom, *Descartes' Baby*, p. 182. I suspect too that it is a lot more fun to see these movies if you are in a group all of whose members are reacting in the same way: social solidarity – we in our group are capable of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(iv) Another variation on the weighting view suggests that disgusting artworks arouse not only disgust but some other more positive emotion (or emotions) which can outweigh the 'negative' emotion of disgust.[59] An enjoyment of transgression is probably part of the appeal of Damien Hirst's undeniably disgusting work 'A Thousand Years.' The work is disgusting in that it emphasizes a key elicitor of disgust, the cycle of life and decay described so vividly by William Miller. But this work also arouses *curiosity* and *fascination* in comprehending audiences. In a recent review of a Damien Hirst retrospective at the Tate Modern, Julian Bell describes this work which is a recreation of an original from 1990.

> [In] A Thousand Years, … the insects are behind glass and anything but exotic: flies in their hundreds, trapped in a garage-sized vitrine with an interior box shelter in which their maggots hatch. On the floor lies their food, the head of a freshly killed cow. From the ceiling dangles their fate, the chill UV striplights of an insecto-cutor, into which they are drawn and die. I stand outside watching the process, which is full of *strange fascination* (my italics): the sudden swarmings of the flies, the way their dead bodies accumulate, the winding puddle of blood that has welled from the cow's neck over the gallery's oak floor. I sense the closedness of the cycle—and for a moment I am inside there, with the flies, caught up in a kind of grisly living poem. Then a detail returns me to spectatorhood: the way the blood trail concludes with a tiny island drip, like the dot of an exclamation mark.[60]

Bell reports that he felt fascinated by the piece, and it sounds from his description that his fascination outweighed the disgust he also

---

enduring disgust – seems to be part of the appeal, like kids' enjoyment of fear-inducing daredevil games. (But I have no empirical proof of this.)

[59] (iv) and (ii) are clearly related. (ii) focuses on the disgusting properties of an artwork that can be outweighed by other positive properties. (iv) focuses on the emotion and emotional feelings of disgust experienced by an audience, which may be outweighed by a more positive emotion or emotional feelings. But (ii), which is a generalization of (i), is not confined to *emotional* properties.

[60] *Damien Hirst:* an exhibition at Tate Modern, London, April 4–September 9, 2012, reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 59, no. 9, May 24, 2012, by Julian Bell.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experienced.[61] In a different vein, Paul McCarthy's giant sculpture *Complex Shit* (2008) is simultaneously disgusting – this is a representation of a giant dog turd, after all – and *amusing*: the sculpture is inflatable and huge (as big as a house).[62] Here again we have a case where the weighting view seems plausible: our amusement at the giant inflatable turd may outweigh our disgust.

(3) The Integrationist View: The Disgusting as Amusing

Gary Iseminger has distinguished between two proposed solutions to the paradoxes of aversion. According to the 'Co-Existentialist View,' the 'feeling of pleasure with reference to distressful fictions is a case of one feeling's being strong enough to overcome the other.'[63] This is essentially what I have been calling the Weighting View. By contrast, according to the 'Integrationist View,' the very distress that we feel for 'the events [persons, situations, or objects] depicted' *contributes to* the pleasure we take in the [artwork].'[64] Iseminger's example is melodrama where (he claims) it sometimes happens that 'one is saddened by the events depicted and the very sadness contributes to the pleasure we take in the fiction.' By analogy, there might be cases in which 'when one derives pleasure from a [disgusting artwork], one is [disgusted] by the events [persons, situations, or objects] depicted, and the very [disgust] contributes to the pleasure we take in the artwork.'[65] Since I am interested in a broader range of 'positive' qualities and emotions than merely pleasure, I prefer a more inclusive version of the 'Integrationist View' with respect to disgust. Instead of restricting the response to pleasure, I suggest that the Integrationist View should be construed as the view that the disgust I experience when faced with a disgusting artwork 'contributes to' a *positive experience* of the work, where by 'positive' I

[61] Similarly, Noël Carroll has emphasized how a disgusting and fearsome monster in a horror movie is nevertheless an object of intense curiosity and fascination.

[62] It memorably escaped its moorings at an exhibition at the Paul Klee Center in Berne, Switzerland, in 2008, breaking windows and bringing down a power line!

[63] Gary Iseminger, 'How Strange a Sadness,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **42**/1 (1983), p. 191. The term 'Co-Existentialist' is unfortunate. What Iseminger seems to mean is that two feelings, pleasure and distress, *co-exist* in our reaction.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mean an experience that one would want to have, and once achieved, one would want to continue, other things being equal.[66]

To say that disgust can 'contribute' to pleasure or a positive experience, however, is very unclear. After all, if I am pleased by my tolerance for the disgusting (as in Feagin's solution), then the disgusting 'contributes to' my pleasure. But in such cases I am not responding positively to the disgusting artwork itself, but only to my own ability to tolerate it. I suspect that Iseminger's 'integrationist' view is more perspicuously described in relation to disgust as the view that sometimes when I have a positive experience of a disgusting artwork, what I enjoy is something about the *disgusting itself*. Consider, for example, enjoyment of the transgressiveness of a disgusting gross-out movie. What we enjoy (if we do) is not simply transgressiveness, but the transgressiveness of something disgusting, such as watching people vomit or defecate in public. In many popular disgusting movies our enjoyment (if any) is in the disgusting *appraised as transgressive*. The disgust is *integral* to the enjoyment because it is the contaminating and putrid – the object of disgust – which is appraised as enjoyably transgressive.

Similarly, where an artwork arouses the unpleasant emotion of disgust as well as some positive emotion such as fascination or amusement, sometimes the positive emotion is directed towards an object or event that is appraised as not simply amusing but amusing partly *because* it is also contaminating and putrid. In such cases the disgust is 'integral' to the experience in that what I enjoy is the fascination or humor *of* something disgusting. Not all amusing things are disgusting, of course, and not all disgusting things are amusing. It is only when I am amused by something disgusting *because* it is disgusting that disgust is 'integral' to my amusement. Interestingly, Nina Strohminger and her colleagues have found empirical evidence that in 'contexts where we are evaluating something for its humor,' disgust 'makes targets seem funny rather than revolting.' (Her example is masturbating with a chicken carcass.) As they put the point, 'disgust enhances the funniness of humor.'[67]

Strohminger and her colleagues claim that in such situations people *find disgust enjoyable*. But this cannot be right. As we saw in

[66] Compare Korsmeyer on pleasure: an 'aesthetic pleasure' should be reconstrued as 'an intense absorption in an object that induces us to continue rather than halt an experience,' *Savoring Disgust*, p. 124. See also footnote 83.

[67] Nina Strohminger et al, 'Disgust enhances the funniness of humor,' Manuscript under review, p. 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the discussion of the 'Pleasurable Disgust' solution to the paradox of disgust, people do not enjoy feeling disgusted. It is not *disgust* that people enjoy but *the disgusting*, and because the disgusting is unremittingly repulsive, it cannot be the disgusting *as such* that people enjoy but rather the disgusting object viewed as humorous or as fascinating or as having some other positive quality.[68] Similarly, when I feel thrilled or exalted by the sublime, I am not thrilled or exalted by the *terror* that I feel, but by the *terrible*.[69] The object of terror – such as the vastness and power of nature – is also the object of thrilled exaltation. The terror is *integral* to the thrilled exaltation because it is the terrible vastness and power of nature that is appraised as thrilling and exalting, and it is thrilling and exalting partly *because* it is terrible.

As we saw earlier, disgust is a basic emotion in the *psychological* as well as the biological sense, hence it is able to serve as a 'building block' for mixed emotions or blends of emotion. When an artwork is amusing partly *because* it is disgusting, it is reasonable to think that the appropriate response is a mixture of disgust and amusement. Something normally viewed as contaminating, such as an enormous turd facsimile, can be both disgusting and amusing, and amusing partly *because* disgusting. Similarly, in an experience of the sublime we feel mixed emotions of terror and admiration or reverence, and our admiration or reverence is directed towards the terrible. For example, the vastness and power of nature arouses terror and at the same time admiration or reverence for its 'terribleness.' In English we call this mixture of reverence and terror 'awe.'[70] There is no comparable term for a mix of amusement and disgust, but in our culture it is an instantly recognizable emotion. One can imagine, however, that some other cultures might find this mix of emotions very puzzling. Although disgust is a pan-cultural 'basic' emotion, this does not

[68] This is true for disgust in real life as well as disgust responses for artworks.

[69] This is a point emphasized to me by Alex Neill.

[70] Keltner and Haidt also emphasize (like Kant) how 'prototypical awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast.' Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 'Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion,' *Cognition and Emotion* **17** (2003), p. 304. Some prefer to talk about emotion blends rather than mixed feelings of two or more emotions. I do not have space here to defend my preference for 'mixed feelings' over 'blends.' However, one problem with the idea of emotion blends is that the responses characteristic of each of the emotions in the 'emotion blend' may interfere with one another rather than blend. In mixed emotions, the two (or more) emotions may remain to some extent distinct.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mean that all cultures have the same *attitude towards* the emotion of disgust: indeed, the idea that the disgusting can be amusing might well seem bizarre even to some people in our own culture.

Strohminger suggests that perhaps 'emotions can have multiple appraisals which come more or less to the fore depending on context.'[71] Thus in mixed feelings of amusement and disgust, perhaps the appraisal characteristic of disgust (it's tainted and/or putrid) 'recedes' as the appraisal of humor comes 'to the fore.' (Presumably in someone who is not amused, the reverse would be true.) If this means that in responding to something that is both disgusting and amusing, the tainted quality of the object may be more or less salient than its amusing qualities, this seems very plausible.[72] Different aspects of an object can be more or less salient, and in a mix of disgust and amusement, the disgusting object can be appraised as more or less disgusting, and more or less amusing. However, in cases where we are amused by something partly *because* it is disgusting, the disgust response would seem to be primary in that it is a requirement for the amusement response.

Things are a little different with respect to disgust and fascination, however.[73] Whereas the disgusting is not always amusing, it seems as though the disgusting almost invariably has a fascinating aspect. However, the intentional objects of fascination and disgust seem to be inconsistent – being attractive and repulsive respectively – and the characteristic responses of fascination and disgust are also inconsistent – magnetic attraction versus more or less violent withdrawal. But although the 'attractive' is often identified with the pretty and endearing, some things attract us even though 'unattractive' in the usual sense.[74] Human beings seem perfectly capable of simultaneous attraction to and repulsion for the same object, such as Hirst's 'A Thousand Years'. Indeed, it seems as if we are fascinated partly *because* we are repelled. I suspect that in such cases the intentional objects of the emotions are subtly different. The actual set-up – the

[71] Strohminger et al, 'Disgust enhances the funniness of humor,' p. 6.

[72] Sometimes Strohminger seems to be saying that an appraisal of taint 'recedes' in the sense that it tends to vanish, but in amusing-but-disgusting artworks or real life situations, the appraisal of taint must be present alongside the appraisal of incongruity (or whatever).

[73] It might be questioned whether fascination is a bona fide emotion. However, it has the marks of one: it involves an appraisal of something perceived as very significant to me; it appears to have a characteristic response (attraction and fixation of attention) and expression (the gaze); and the initial appraisal can be monitored for appropriateness.

[74] Thanks to Alex Neill for this insight.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insects feeding on the cow's blood, their dead bodies lying around, and so on – is undeniably disgusting, but Hirst's clever dramatization of the inexorable cycle of death and decay is also fascinating: this is our own fate unfolding before us.[75]

The upshot of this discussion seems to be that the 'Integrationist View' is simply another version of the Weighting View, in which a positive emotion is directed towards a disgusting object, situation or event appraised as not only disgusting but also as having some more positive property *because* it is disgusting. Thus eating dog feces (orally incorporating what is viewed panculturally as highly contaminating) is a paradigm elicitor of disgust, but in the context of the famous scene in the John Waters film *Pink Flamingoes*, the very disgustingness of the situation may also elicit amusement. And sometimes – for some people – in such 'integrated' cases of mixed emotions, the positive emotion will over-ride the negative, although both are present.

(4) The 'Conversion' View

Hume claimed that in our experience of tragedy, not only are we delighted by formal qualities, but also the unpleasant emotions aroused (by the subject matter) are *converted* into pleasant ones: '… the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us.'[76] By analogy, although disgust is unpleasant, in aesthetic contexts perhaps it can be *converted* into aesthetic pleasure.[77] In Hume's formulation, however, the conversion solution is highly implausible: disgust cannot 'convert' into pleasure without losing its character and ceasing to be disgust. Both the core relational theme for disgust and the disgust response with

[75] Compare Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, p. 24, where she writes that reflecting on the idea that all mortals will die and disintegrate inspires 'curiosity' and 'fascination.'

[76] Hume, 'Of Tragedy,' p. 26.

[77] Sometimes Strohminger writes as if she endorses this view, for example, when she says 'people find disgust enjoyable in certain contexts' as though sometimes disgust can somehow transform into pleasure. 'Disgust enhances the funniness of humor,' p. 1. Strohminger (personal communication) holds that 'you can change one dimension of an emotion (e.g. valence) while still retaining the other dimensions (e.g. a sense of yuckiness, beliefs about contamination).' I would question this assertion, at least for basic emotions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its concomitant feelings are unremittingly unpleasant. At best a disgusting object can be appraised as fascinating or amusing or pleasurable *as well as* – and sometimes *because of* – being repellent, but if the object is disgusting, then, even if it has other more pleasant properties as well, the response to it will normally be, at least in part, deeply unpleasant.

Korsmeyer claims that 'aesthetic disgust,' which 'apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a component of appreciation,'[78] can be a 'component of recognition' of the *value* of an artwork, and 'a significant feature of aesthetic judgment.'[79] Here Korsmeyer rightly emphasizes that the *aesthetic value* of artworks outstrips pleasure, so that even if disgust is not pleasurable, it can have *aesthetic value* in art contexts. The traditional model for the paradoxes of aversion was set in the 18th century when both beauty and the sublime were held to produce different varieties of aesthetic *pleasure*. But today we recognize that pleasure is not the only value that the experience of works of art has to offer us. Even artworks that are not primarily designed to provide pleasure can have cognitive value, and for many contemporary thinkers, cognitive values are important *aesthetic* values. As Flint Schier has argued with respect to tragedy, we '*spontaneously* seek – without utilitarian forethought – experiences painful in themselves which we nonetheless value.'[80]

There is an important distinction between disgusting works that are designed primarily for pleasure or entertainment and disgusting works that are primarily aimed at *insight*, which is both a cognitive and an aesthetic value. Clearly most gross-out movies do not repay reflection, whereas the greatest works of disgusting art invite 'cognitive monitoring' of the disgust they arouse. Thus Aaron Ridley has stressed that we attend great tragedies even though they contain extremely painful events, such as the death of Cordelia or the blinding of Oedipus, because they raise deep and important issues which we find valuable to reflect upon.[81] What Ridley says about great tragedies applies equally to great disgusting artworks. They too raise

[78] Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, p. 88.

[79] Ibid., p. 89.

[80] Flint Schier, 'Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment,' in Eileen John and Dominic Lopes eds., *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 199.

[81] See Aaron Ridley, 'Tragedy' in Jerrold Levinson ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 419. For this reason he claims that it is absurd to think that the paradox of tragedy is in any way parallel to the 'paradox of horror.' For the importance of 'cognitive monitoring' of emotions in art contexts, see my *Deeper than Reason*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

deep questions about life and values that are important for us to reflect upon.[82]

Korsmeyer argues that 'in its more profound uses, at the root of the apprehension afforded by the arousal of disgust is recognition of the aspects of death that are the least heroic: stench and bodily disintegration presented with particular intimacy and nearness.'[83] She sees the basic elicitor of disgust as the decay and disintegration of organisms, especially ourselves, and she emphasizes the power of the insight that comes from a powerful visceral disgust response. There is a big difference between simply telling me that one day my body will disintegrate – something I surely already know – and presenting that insight in a poem such as *Une charogne* by eliciting a powerful disgust response. But notice that with respect to such cases of 'aesthetic disgust,' the paradox of disgust simply dissolves: there is nothing paradoxical about the fact that an unpleasant emotion can be a means towards knowledge or insight. In ordinary life, jealousy and grief, for example, can both lead to insights about what I truly value. And when artworks successfully try to instill insights by arousing unpleasant emotions, this *cognitive* value may be an important part of their *aesthetic* value.[84]

[82] Of course, it is not always clear to which category a particular work belongs. Thus Andres Serrano (author of the infamous 'Piss Christ') has recently completed a series of giant photographs of animal shit. They have such titles as 'Self-Portrait Shit' and 'Hieronymous Bosch Shit.' Such art can lay claim to being adventurous and transgressive, like gross-out movies, but no doubt the defenders of serious 'shit art' would claim that it also carries some more profound meaning ('a meditation on the corporeality of existence' perhaps), i.e., to invite not just an emotional response of shock and/or disgust but also reflection on the meaning of these reactions and what it is about the artwork that prompts such reactions. See Donald Kuspit, 'The Triumph of Shit' (2008) for a vigorous attack on the pretensions of such art. http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit9-11-08.asp

[83] Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, p. 127.

[84] Korsmeyer says that the 'disgust remains aversive' (130) but 'the knowledge gained by means of it affords enjoyment' (130). She argues that aesthetic 'pleasure' or enjoyment is best identified with 'what absorbs attention in artworks' (118), and tries in this way to link pleasure to the cognitive value of artworks. But, as Mitchell Green pointed out in his comments on Korsmeyer's book at the *American Philosophical Association* Pacific Division meetings in Seattle, April 2012, this account of enjoyment requires qualification: one can enjoy chewing gum even though it is not a very absorbing activity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Korsmeyer, however, wants to go further, suggesting that in some cases of great art, 'what is ordinarily an aversion sometimes may *convert* in affective tenor to an aesthetic attraction.'[85] She proposes a new aesthetic category, the sublate, which is designed to parallel the sublime.

> As a rule, aesthetic emotions (i.e., those that constitute appreciative arousal) are varieties of everyday emotions: anxiety, sorrow, dread, anticipation, happiness, and so forth, although they may alter in their aesthetic form from the ordinary variety.... With certain emotions, however, aesthetic transformation is so profound that an entirely new affective experience is brought into being.[86]

According to Korsmeyer, in the experience of the *sublime*, terror is 'transmogrified into powerful and transportive aesthetic delight,' the recognition of 'might, magnificence, and the ineffable endlessness of the cosmos.'[87] Analogously, in the *sublate*, disgust is *converted* into 'insight,' specifically the insight that even 'the noblest life' will be reduced to 'decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated.'[88] When disgust 'converts' to the sublate, it grasps insights about mortality and putrefaction 'with palpable somatic resonance.'[89] The sublate is the contrary of the sublime: rather than exalting the spirit (or the rational will), it rubs our noses in the fact that we will all one day be eaten by worms.

The experience of the sublime, however, is not a matter of a 'negative' emotion, terror, *converting* into a positive emotion, admiration or reverence. Rather, the very same object is appraised as both terrible and admirable, and as admirable partly *because* terrible. This explanation avoids the Humean difficulty of explaining how a negative emotion can 'convert' into a positive. But Korsmeyer's account of the sublate is subtly different from her account of the sublime: in the sublate disgust is converted not into another (positive) emotion but into *insight*. How does the Conversion Account fare on this new interpretation?

85 Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, p. 130.
86 Ibid. p. 131.
87 Ibid. p. 133.
88 Ibid. p. 134.
89 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Aesthetic Disgust?

According to Korsmeyer, an experience of the sublate 'gives rise to an apprehension … of an idea that is so embedded in affective response to the work that provokes it as to be virtually inseparable.'[90] Just as, she thinks, the sublime converts terror into admiration and respect, so the 'sublate' converts disgust into an intensely satisfying experience of 'insight in a bodily, visceral response.'[91] Disgust is converted into 'an aesthetically significant quality [the sublate] that has an emotive tone all its own.'[92] However, fear (in the experience of the sublime) and disgust (in the experience of the sublate) do not lose their nature altogether 'in the process of aesthetic conversion,' such that 'in their aesthetic form they are no longer members of those classes of emotion.'[93] What changes is the *valence* of disgust.

> What is converted is not the emotion itself but its valence; the insight it affords by means of the particular artistry with which it is delivered is central to its aesthetic import and value.[94]

Korsmeyer's book contains a treasure-trove of insights about the nature of disgust and the many different ways it can operate in our responses to works of art, but there are a number of reasons for denying that there is a special aesthetic category of the 'sublate' as she describes it. While she is correct to point out that a disgust reaction to a work of art may well be a source of insight, it does not follow that disgust can ever 'change its valence' in an aesthetic context while still remaining disgust. As I have emphasized throughout this paper, disgust is a basic emotion. The valence of the disgust appraisal is negative not only insofar as the core relational theme for disgust is highly disagreeable (the tainted and putrid), but also because the disgust response and the bodily feelings of that response are also highly disagreeable. Disgust 'converted' into a positive emotion is no longer disgust. More importantly, in order to give us the kind of insight Korsmeyer identifies, it is essential that disgust remains itself, the basic emotion I described earlier. Korsmeyer is right that we get insight in a peculiarly immediate and visceral way through

[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid. p. 131.
[92] Ibid. p. 139.
[93] Ibid. p. 132.
[94] Ibid. p. 139. In this quotation we seem to be back with the 'pleasurable disgust' solution to the paradox of disgust.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experiencing disgust, but the insight, if any, depends essentially on the experience of disgust. If the experience were not so unpleasant, we could not receive the relevant insight.

Korsmeyer is at pains throughout her book to emphasize that 'aesthetic disgust' comes in many varieties: 'it can be funny, pathetic, contemptible, sympathetic, and uneasy:'[95] 'aesthetic emotions are individuated not just by characteristic traits of a type of object but also by specific artworks.'[96] But this way of putting things is misleading on two counts. First, as I have commented before, *disgust* is not funny or contemptible or pathetic or whatever; it's *the disgusting* which can be characterized in these ways, not disgust itself. Because disgust is a basic emotion, the feelings (*qualia*) that result from an experience of disgust are relatively fixed, and when Korsmeyer claims that the *qualia* of disgust vary from one disgusting artwork to another, I think what she is drawing attention to is rather the subtle mixtures of emotions that artworks can arouse, in which disgust is but one element. Thus some artworks are horrific, terrifying and disgusting, whereas others are disgusting and amusing or disgusting and pathetic. Artworks educate us sentimentally partly by enlarging our repertoires of emotional states.

Secondly, the whole idea of 'aesthetic disgust' as a special sort of disgust, that which 'apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a component of appreciation'[97] seems to me misleading. There is no special aesthetic type of disgust; disgust is the same emotion whether elicited by ordinary life or by art. And like any other emotion – positive or negative – it can sometimes provide illumination, again both in life and in art. The visceral spasm that teaches me what human mortality really means can be caused by seeing a carcass in the road or by Baudelaire's poem about a carcass. Of course there are differences between disgust in life and in fiction. Perhaps the main difference is that Baudelaire can control our response in a way that situations in life cannot, so that we likely learn a more nuanced truth from his poem than from seeing actual roadkill.[98] By the same token, there is no special aesthetic category of the sublate in which somehow aesthetic disgust is converted into insight. Joy, sorrow, pity, anger, anxiety can all be aroused in artworks in such a way as to provide insight, but there is no reason to

[95] Ibid. p. 98.
[96] Ibid. p. 101.
[97] Ibid. p. 88.
[98] See my *Deeper than Reason*, e.g. chs. 6 and 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

think that there is a special aesthetic category for each of these emotions.[99]

Of course, as with other emotions, we need to monitor what our bodily reactions are 'telling' us, in order to ensure that our disgust reactions are appropriate. As in life, disgust in art can be used to manipulate us in ways that can be morally questionable. In some fiction, for example, the mutilated, the disabled, and people with different bodily types or eating habits from ourselves are presented as not only disgusting but evil, and evil *because* disgusting.[100] In *Deeper than Reason* I argued that the greatest artworks among those that set out to arouse emotions, do not *merely* arouse emotions: they encourage their audiences to *monitor* their emotional responses *cognitively*. In other words, we are not only encouraged to experience powerful emotional reactions of disgust (say) but also given sophisticated guidance by the creator of the work in how to reflect on the emotions we are experiencing, whether they are justified or not, and what it is about the work that has made us react in this way.[101] In this respect there is nothing special about the way artworks can give us insight via the arousal of disgust: *all* emotions are potentially able to enlighten us about ourselves and/or the world in which we live, and *all* emotions can play a role in aesthetic understanding. Nevertheless, Korsmeyer is quite right to emphasize that because disgust is such a visceral emotion, it can deliver its insights in a particularly powerful, bodily way.

Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne'

I conclude by showing how Baudelaire's 'Une charogne' ('A Carcass') from *Les Fleurs du Mal* illustrates in a condensed form the two most promising solutions to the paradox of disgust: (1) the Weighting Solution in one of its various forms, including the 'integrationist' version; and (2) the idea that disgust can provide insight, which,

[99] Although certain genres can be defined in part by the emotions they aim to elicit. See e.g. Noël Carroll, 'Film, Emotion and Genre' in Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), and my 'Sentimentality in Life and Literature' in Kathleen Higgins and David Sherman eds. *Passion, Death, and Spirituality: the Philosophy of Robert C. Solomon* (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 67–89.

[100] Frankenstein's monster, for example. See Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

[101] This is a theme that runs through my *Deeper than Reason*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even if unpleasant to contemplate, is nevertheless an important cognitive value of art.

Baudelaire's poem is undeniably disgusting, yet so beautifully structured that we can take pleasure in its formal aspects even if we recoil from its content. The form of the poem is masterly: Baudelaire uses a familiar trope – the poet who will immortalize his beloved after her death – but instead of the elegiac tone one expects, the tone is bitterly ironic. The imagery, as always in Baudelaire, is vivid and often shocking: the legs of the carcass are thrust into the air like 'une femme lubrique;' flies buzz around the 'putrid belly' of the carcass from which come 'de noirs bataillons / De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide / Le long de ces vivants haillons;' as for these worms that have invaded the corpse, 'on eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un soufflé vague, / Vivait en se multipliant.' And at the end of the description of the carcass, a grisly detail: a dog is waiting behind a rock for the lovers to go by so that she can recapture the morsel she had to let drop when the lovers appeared. The poem is structurally tight-knit with an a-b-a-b rhyme scheme – as well as many examples of half-rhymes – that help to convey the meaning of the poem with maximum economy. Thus, the beloved – 'Mon âme' is immediately in the first stanza linked to the 'charogne infâme' as well as – less obviously – to the 'beau matin' which is about to be disrupted. Later the poet exclaims that the beloved, 'soleil de ma nature,' will one day be 'semblable à cette ordure, and 'mon ange et ma passion' will be reduced to an 'infection.'

The poem is also deliberately transgressive. Baudelaire, well-known as a 'bad boy' of literature, invites us to enjoy the transgressive aspects of the poem even as we are disgusted by it. And perhaps we will be pleased with ourselves for enduring the disgust we feel in order to appreciate a modernist masterwork. Moreover, the emotions that the poem invites are not restricted to simple disgust. I think that the poem is also in a grim way *amusing* in the way that Baudelaire juxtaposes the image of the beloved's beauty with the disgusting decaying corpse on the ground, full of multiplying larvae. Indeed we are amused partly *by* the disgusting images that Baudelaire has conjured. He has turned the typical love poem upside down: instead of lamenting the passing of beauty, he seems to take a grim, ironic satisfaction in its eventual decay. And the final lines – 'Tell the vermin who will eat you up with kisses that I have preserved the form and divine essence of my decomposed loves!' – is amusing because the sentiment is so *un*romantic, and so unlike what de Musset or Lamartine might have made of this scenario. Is there also a hint of tenderness here, in the emphasis on the concrete details of the beloved's corporeal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disintegration by contrast with her present blooming beauty? We know that Baudelaire fluctuated between affection and contempt for Jeanne Duval, about whom the poem was written, and the final lines seem to me to encompass both these feelings.

Although amusing in a bitter way, the poem is not designed primarily to amuse, however, like some more trivial works of disgusting art. Rather it is a vivid expression of a complex emotional mixture of feelings of love and tenderness on the one hand, and disgust and a kind of bitter, half amused, half contemptuous satisfaction on the other. Baudelaire does not lament the fact that only his verses will survive to preserve 'la forme et l'essence divine / De mes amours décomposés' but seems to take an almost vindictive pride in this fact. And he seems to want to arouse in his readers a complex mixture of emotions in which disgust, shock and grim amusement are perhaps the most salient.[102] Most importantly, however, these emotions alert us to what the poem is expressing and help us to understand the tone and the 'message' of the poem. The disgust we feel provides aesthetic *insight*.[103] The poem teaches us in a visceral and shocking way about a very unromantic view of love. The beloved is not an ideal; her beautiful body will disintegrate and rot, and the worms will devour her. And love itself is not an ideal, but is governed by 'the eternal recurrence of viscous, teeming, swarming generation and the putrefaction and decay that attend it.'[104] Faced with this visceral insight into love as part of a disgusting cycle of life and decay, it is inappropriate to take an elegiac tone. For Baudelaire, all it is appropriate to feel is bitter amusement and contemptuous disgust. And with this insight, Baudelaire also signals the arrival of a new poetic sensibility. The visceral spasm of disgust the poem arouses in comprehending readers also alerts us to the fact that Modernism has arrived and that Romanticism is itself decomposing and will soon be fit only for the worms![105]

University of Cincinnati
robinsjm@ucmail.uc.edu

[102] As well as admiration for Baudelaire's poetic powers.

[103] Presumably, for Korsmeyer this would be an example of the 'sublate.'

[104] Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 64.

[105] Many thanks to Matthew Kieran, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Aaron Meskin, and Alex Neill for interesting and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to the Charles Phelps Taft Research Center which partially supported this research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246114000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press