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GUT APPRECIATION: POSSIBILITIES FOR AESTHETIC DISGUST

I first became interested in the emotion of disgust in the 1990s, just as it was becoming a trendy topic for discussion in psychology and philosophy of art¹. At that time, the legacy of thinking on the topic was relatively scanty. Disgust was still under-analyzed, frequently presumed to be not only a 'basic' emotion but also a rather simple one, a kind of sensory automatic recoil that operates in an all-or-nothing fashion to keep us away from polluted or toxic substances. As such, it didn't appear to be an emotion capable of conveying very interesting or profound meanings. Given its primary – and even perhaps exclusive – function as a warning signal to avoid contaminants, this emotion appeared to be more reactive than ruminative. From this perspective, disgust would seem to have a limited role to play in art, whose products include complex phenomena demanding subtle interpretation. Moreover, this approach would surely imply considerable difficulty in assigning disgust a positively valenced role in appreciation.

With a couple of exceptions among theorists interested in horror², philosophical perspectives on disgust still reflected the views perpetuated by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Lessing, who held that alone among emotions disgust could not be aroused by art and still provide aesthetic appeal³. Yet at the same time, the

¹ This paper is revised from a presentation at the Eastern Division of the American Society for Aesthetics in April, 2013. I thank the audience and my co-panelists, Greg Horowitz and William Davis, for their helpful comments.

² Such as N. Carroll, *The philosophy of horror*, New York, Routledge, 1990 and C. Freeland, *The naked and the undead*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000.

³ The eighteenth-century literature on this thesis is extensively analyzed by W. Menninghaus, *Disgust: theory and history of a strong sensation*, trans. by H. Eiland - J. Garb, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003.

worlds of art and entertainment were exploiting this emotion with unprecedented verve – depicting and arousing disgust with all the devices available to their mediums. Artworks have always deployed disgust with images and descriptions of mutilations, rot, bodily wastes, and gore in the course of propelling plots or enhancing depictions, often to convey a sense of mortality, human frailty, or sin. Moreover, much art of the last decades includes many works that appear to be aimed at the arousal of disgust as the primary purpose or end of a creative work⁴. The social and cultural meaning of this latter phenomenon is worthy of a study of its own, though I shall not address it here. Rather, I want to investigate a particular aspect of the sort of aesthetic satisfaction that disgust can deliver when it is aroused by works of art.

Disgust no longer stands at the sidelines of research investigating human emotions. Among artists, philosophers, psychologists, and neurobiologists, interest in disgust has burgeoned markedly in the last two decades, and theorists from all of these fields have provided insights about the nature of this emotion in and out of the worlds of art. Most markedly, especially among philosophers and others who write in the humanities, disgust no longer appears to be a simple emotion at all. Indeed, its affective tone and the meanings it can convey are recognized to be varied and complex. The satisfactions that disgust delivers when deftly deployed in art attain a valence that can be hard to analyze. In particular, whether or not disgust aroused by art can itself be a zone of pleasure, enjoyment, or positive response remains an issue that continues to be under debate. It is this latter aspect of the disgusting that I shall investigate in this essay.

In the book *Savoring disgust* (2011) I sought to understand how an emotion characterized by strong and unpleasant physiological revulsion could function as an aesthetic emotion, by which I meant a mode of apprehension and appreciation of certain kinds of art. Here is a working definition of aesthetic disgust: «The arousal of disgust in an audience, a spectator, or a reader, under circumstances where that emotion both apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a com-

⁴ C. Talon-Hugon, *Goût et dégoût: l'art peut-il tout montrer?*, Nîmes, Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 2003.

ponent of appreciation»⁵. Arousal of emotion in an appreciative mode could describe any emotion aesthetically employed, of course. Thrillers and horror narratives deliberately arouse fear and anxiety; stories with social import may evoke indignation, resentment, or sympathy. Images and texts prompt one to feel sorrow, affection, surprise, and amusement, and of course there are many works that play with the emotions and responses that mark erotic affects and effects. In short, the actual arousal – in addition to the depiction or portrayal – of emotions is pervasive in virtually all art forms. However, the deliberate arousal of disgust as a mode of appreciation raises especially vivid puzzles because of this emotion’s strongly aversive character. And despite the undeniable presence of disgust both depicted and aroused by compelling works of art, its aesthetic appeal remains puzzling. As one scientific researcher remarked two decades ago: «It would be difficult to generate approach tendencies toward an object that elicits disgust»⁶. And yet art compels attention and invites just such an approach tendency. A more recent comment from a philosopher reasserts a contemporary version of the older caution: «Art must attract the senses; it cannot repel them»⁷. Evidently, the deployment of disgust in works of art continues to invite investigation.

Disgust is a physically uncomfortable emotion, arousing disagreeable visceral sensations ranging from skin-crawling queasiness to outright nausea. Its objects are not noble, as might be those of other taxing emotions such as fear or anger. The intentional objects of disgust are lowly, base, stinking, slimy, and contaminating, and they include bodily waste products, decaying organic matter, gore and mutilation, corpses, and vermin. All of these elements may be found in art, and they often offend and revolt audiences. Sometimes when such matters are the subject-matter of art, the audience is also amused, curious, or sympathetic. That is, the presence of disgusting content does not entail a wholesale disgust-reaction on the part of a viewer or reader, and sometimes disgust is erased by representational features that amuse or interest. As Aristotle remarked more than

⁵ C. Korsmeyer, *Savoring disgust: the foul and the fair in aesthetics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 88.

⁶ R.J. Davidson, *Complexities in the search for emotion-specific physiology*, in P. Ekman - R.J. Davidson (eds.), *The nature of emotion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 239.

⁷ C. McGinn, *The meaning of disgust*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 200.

two millennia ago, even a rotting corpse, if deftly rendered in mimetic form, may become an object of pleasurable learning.

The tough problem arises when the viewer or reader not only recognizes the disgusting character of depicted objects and events, but is also really disgusted. That is, when the emotion is actually aroused in the course of apprehending the work. As such, disgust can play at least two roles. In some cases, one simply rejects a work and deems it too nasty for appreciation. This verdictive reaction marks an aesthetic judgment of sorts, but disgust is not functioning appreciatively in this case; therefore, I would not label this response a case of aesthetic disgust. However, there is a more significant role the emotion can play when it is evoked, namely, when it is aroused as part of full understanding and appreciation of a work. In these cases, disgust certainly counts among the responses that Bernard Bosanquet characterizes as involving «difficult» artistic qualities, those that require the «capacity to endure and enjoy feeling at high tension»⁸. There are lots of uncomfortable, high-tension emotions, fear, dread, and sorrow among them. But one might question whether the capacity to endure disgust is worth the outcome. What can disgust offer us to induce our willing participation? Given the endemic negativity and aversiveness of this emotion, we may well ask: how can the reaction of disgust remain intact – that is to say, with no change in the identity of the emotion – and still be part of a positive aesthetic experience?

Many schools of thought analyze 'positive' aesthetic responses as brands of pleasure, a theoretical approach underwritten by the founding philosophies of aesthetics in the European Enlightenment⁹. I am suspicious about the usefulness of the language of pleasure to diagnose aesthetic disgust, and I side with those thinkers who argue that satisfaction from art is far more complex than hedonic terminology is able to capture¹⁰. At the same time, I do not believe that disgust always utterly repels when it is aroused by works of art. Often it does,

⁸ B. Bosanquet, *Three lectures on aesthetic*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, p. 48.

⁹ Some current psychological research uses the more neutral term 'valence', but valence itself is parsed in terms of pleasantness and unpleasantness. See, e.g. A. Kron et al, *How are you feeling? Revisiting the quantification of emotional qualia*, «Psychological Science» 20 (2013), 10, pp. 1-9.

¹⁰ E.g. J. Levinson, *The pleasures of aesthetics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996, pp. 18-20.

of course; disgust does not operate the same way in every case, and there are many works that arouse disgust to convey a point so painful that ‘enjoying’ the disgust response would be wrongheaded and perverse. But is this always the case? Are there no artistic examples that arouse disgust in a way that is actually relished, even enjoyed? The title term I selected for this essay – *Gut appreciation* – does not invoke pleasure but still connotes a type of attraction or appeal, suggesting the idea of ‘savoring’ the affect engendered by a work. The gustatory connotation is deliberate. Disgust is a highly sensory emotion, and one of the senses that it centrally engages is taste¹¹ (in certain languages ‘disgusting’ connotes the opposite of ‘tasty’). Therefore, *prima facie* it appears to be impossible – or at least paradoxical – to savor something that disgusts. Nonetheless, within the worlds of art, I believe that, no matter how uncomfortable the experience, aesthetic disgust can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to savor the feeling.

To appreciate this possibility, we need to recognize that both disgusting content and affective responses come in many varieties. When we think of art that disgusts, the first examples that come to mind are probably the maggoty corpses in Damien Hirst’s vitrines; or the stomach-turning murders, autopsies, mutilations and degradations that are often presented on television and in film. But I am equally interested in the more restrained and subtle disturbances that mark appreciation, such as the cringe occasioned by the blade beginning to cut skin from muscle in Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas* or Saturn’s teeth tearing the tender flesh of his infant child in Rubens’ rendition of that story. Disgusting objects present huge variety when they are rendered in complex works of art, including lengthy narrative works in which disgusting images and events occur intermittently or steadily throughout the development of plot. Relatedly, the feeling of disgust admits many degrees, and the extent to which one can

¹¹ See W.I. Miller, *The anatomy of disgust*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997. Oral incorporation of a revolting object is one of the paradigm images of disgust. Charles Darwin is an early thinker who analyzed the sense of taste as central to the arousal of disgust, though others select smell or touch. Also one of the early psychological studies of disgust asserts that «the main threat against which disgust is directed, is the oral incorporation of certain substances» (A. Angyal, *Disgust and related aversions*, «Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology» 36 (1941), p. 394).

reasonably ‘savor’ the experience varies, although I do not think that savoring is merely a function of intensity. Rather, in artistic contexts, it is more a matter of fit between the affect aroused in an audience and the meaning conveyed by a work. Sometimes that fit requires disgust to be aroused in such a painful way that the reader or viewer or audience shudders and turns away, as with war narratives or horror or sometimes tragedy. Other times, one may be invited to inhabit the feeling at greater length, as with comedy. Still other times the deft depiction of a disgusting object is admired, either at the same time that disgust is aroused or as a constituent of the affective response. In those cases, one may gaze protractedly at an image or read lines over and over, savoring the repulsion they arouse.

Further complication is provided by the fact that emotions very rarely appear singly but usually come packaged with other states: fear, tension, anxiety, excitement, dread, sorrow, surprise, amusement. The possibilities are multiple, and the combinations often make singling out the valence of disgust by itself indeterminate. With many of these combinations, disgust certainly remains entirely aversive, just as it is supposed to be in so-called real life. But with some, disgust with all its discomforts can assume a more inviting form, an intriguingly paradoxical situation that is both an issue for contemporary art and culture and an entry into the lists of an ancient puzzle. Let us review that puzzle as a ground for examining the satisfactions of disgust in art.

1. Paradoxes of aversion

With all the attention it has garnered in the last two decades, disgust now sits firmly in the company of the difficult emotions that are counted as aversions in real life and yet exert an appeal in works of art, contributing crucially to the way they deliver insights about cruelty, corporeal nature, mortality, life, death. As such, the task of investigating disgust involves a version of the ancient paradox of tragedy addressed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*: the phenomenon of a supposedly painful emotional event being valued and sought after as if it were pleasant. In order to avoid as much as possible the distracting implications of hedonic terminology (which tends to presume that pleasure is the common denominator that underlies all positive evaluative experiences), I offer the paradox in these terms: how can a feel-

ing that standardly operates as an aversion become an attraction? Or to extend the gustatory language, how can the distasteful come to be savored? Some still say it simply cannot; others suggest ways that it can.

Among the reasons advanced why the arousal of disgust cannot in principle occasion satisfaction or savoring, is the thesis that disgusting content, if artistically successful, transforms into something else in the artistic rendition. Perhaps it is grotesque or even ugly, but it loses the distinctive revulsion of disgust. This is essentially the position maintained by Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Kant, who argued that when disgusting content is rendered in art – that is, when it is rendered successfully and without compromise of aesthetic liking – the qualities of art that would be disgusting in nature are now grotesque, tragic, even ugly¹². In these successful cases, the emotion of disgust is not itself experienced by the perceiver, for disgust remains the emotion that cannot be aroused in an aesthetically positive manner. Only a few theorists still explicitly adhere to this view, for it appears antiquated and squeamish, though there are some contemporary comments that lean in that direction. Moreover, I suspect that a similar sensibility lies behind some persistent hesitation about how to deal with negative emotions in art that I shall return to shortly.

A second approach to the paradox posits that when disgust aroused by art becomes a positive experience (in other words, becomes something that might be called savorable), there are in fact two affective phenomena with competing valences at work: the disgust (which remains negative) and something else, perhaps amusement, or perhaps an insight that so depends on the accompanying disgust that the experience as a whole is valued positively. This is the so-called coexistentialist position, which holds that the knowledge gained from difficult subjects is sufficiently pleasurable that we put up with the negative path that leads to it¹³. Both of these positions imply that disgust always retains an intractably negative, painful, unpleasant, unsavorable tenor.

¹² For a discussion of the complexities and nuances of their views, see M. Mazzocut-Mis, *How far can we go? Pain, excess and the obscene*, trans. by J. Coggan, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, especially ch. 2.

¹³ G. Iseminger, *How strange a sadness*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism» 42 (1983).

Apologists for the disgusting, however, sometimes argue that disgust can become a positive response inasmuch as we can be gratified by the fact that we can tolerate the appropriate arousal of difficult emotions, including those that are discomforting and painful. This is a metatheoretical position that acknowledges the difficulty of experiencing certain sorts of art, but also posits a reason why that difficulty is valued. It is not that the disgust (or other aversion) itself becomes savored, but rather the fact that it is tolerated as a part of artistic understanding becomes itself an object of satisfaction¹⁴.

Finally – and this is the position I explore here – there are works of art that arouse disgust in a way that induces one willingly to dwell in the emotion itself, such that one would prefer to remain in the thrall of disgust rather than to remove oneself. (Sometimes this is termed an ‘integrationist’ account because it does not sequester the aversion from appreciative response.) This position needs to be carefully distinguished from the first, because it maintains that the appreciative affect so produced retains its identity as disgust but shifts valence so that it can be, not necessarily pleasurable, but savorable. But I would stress that all three other diagnoses and their many variations also have confirming examples. There is by no means one and only one mode that disgust assumes in its aesthetic roles. It is appropriate to the heterogeneity of the objects of disgust and to their various deployments in works of art that we need more than one overarching explanation to solve the so-called paradox of aversion. As far as I can judge from the literature, the really controversial position is the last, the one that grants that the feeling of disgust can itself be savored. And given the characteristically aversive nature of disgust, this thesis indeed presents a thorny problem.

This may seem a small point to haggle over. There are many other questions about the roles of disgust in art, including why there is so much of it around these days and just whether there are limits to be reached with art that involves this uncomfortable emotion. Whether or not disgust accompanies or constitutes aesthetic savoring may seem rather academic and picky. However, there is actually quite a lot at stake in the issue. People working in aesthetics are obviously interested in the nature of appreciation and the modes by which the

¹⁴ S. Feagin, *The pleasures of tragedy*, «American Philosophical Quarterly» 20 (1983).

meanings of artworks are apprehended. Moreover, this question also drives some controversies in emotion theory, an area that still harbors many mysteries.

2. Emotions general and aesthetic

One widely-accepted approach to emotions regards them as distinctive responses that are appropriately aroused by a set of elicitors that manifest suitable determinate properties. This picture assumes that the repertoire of human emotions has developed because these responses register qualities of objects and events that are not readily recognized by any other means. If you cannot feel fear, you also do not know what is dangerous, for example. If your reactions of anger are limited, you may overlook injustices (as Aristotle observed). That is, emotions are designed to pick out value qualities in the world around. This very cogent picture, which is adopted by phenomenologists and analytic philosophers alike, as well as by psychologists, is likely to lead one to assume that each emotion has a fairly stable quale, a typical 'feel' that is induced by a suitable range of objects and prompts appropriate behavior. That is, an emotion is conceived as a type of mental state that goes on the alert when it senses one of its proper targets. As such, emotions have motivating force: the pleasant ones induce action towards retaining an object; the unpleasant ones induce retreat, revolt, rejection. While this is a sound way to think about the general function of emotions, this model makes it extremely difficult to explain how one might savor a difficult, unpleasant affective experience such as disgust, whose typical manifestation rejects its objects.

What is more, apart from noting general valence and motivating function, the above approach does not attend in any detailed way to what we might call the phenomenology of emotions – how they feel when aroused. Theorists often avoid trying to describe the zone of feeling in great detail because it appears to be so indeterminate and hard to pin down, and because analysis is so peculiarly reliant on introspection. However, since the quality of affective response is center stage when considering emotions aroused by art, understanding feeling is unavoidable in aesthetics. While psychological experiments that test for affective response employ relatively simple stimuli (images, descriptions), works of art are highly complicated, inviting as

they do the reflective pondering of appreciative audiences, as well as expert critics and reviewers. The multiple interpretations that works sustain invite disparate emotive responses, again further muddling general assessments of the responses of disgust to art. We need at least to reach the point where reports on introspection achieve the level of communication that happens with good criticism, where one person assesses his or her responses to a work and articulates them for others. However, the problem at hand is trickier than with criticism, for when assessing a work of art, critic and audience are talking about the same publically observable object. But asking about the valence attached to the disgust response itself is not so public. Let's see – was that one feeling going on inside me (evidence for integrationism), or two (add to the arsenal of coextensionalism)? How do we tell?

Given the current popularity of neuroimaging, it might be tempting to hook up a machine and count the places in the brain that light up in an fMRI, but I doubt this is a useful route to an answer. There are lots of things that go on in our brains all the time; certainly more than two. Suppose that the anterior insular cortex, an area correlated with disgust experiences, shows activity, and so does one of the parts of the brain correlated with pleasure. Could we determine if the pleasure is a distinct experience traveling alongside disgust? What if the intentional object of the pleasure is the disgust itself rather than the object that triggered it? This kind of experiment might produce interesting data, but I don't see how it can settle the matter at hand. In fact, we face an ineluctably experiential, phenomenological question. This makes it all the more troublesome, for as Daniel Kelly points out in his recent book, *Yuck*, «the qualitative aspect of any mental state or process is notoriously difficult to pin down with empirical data or the resources of functionalism»¹⁵. But it is the qualitative aspect of this state that is crucial for the problem at hand, so we need to pursue it. For better or for worse, at some point we probably must revert to introspection to try to sort through these matters, asking ourselves: can I think of cases where I have lingered over disgusting scenes, descriptions, images, and dwelt within them with an attention akin to relish or savor?

¹⁵ D. Kelly, *Yuck: the nature and moral significance of disgust*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2011, p. 153, n. 3.

A useful guide to pursuing this question is found in the reflections of the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai. Writing well before the advent of recent interest in disgust, Kolnai extensively investigated the varieties of material and moral disgust, and included in his detailed catalog are some observations about the qualitative feelings that characterize this emotion¹⁶. While he classifies disgust as a mode of aversion, he also recognizes what he calls its aesthetic aspect. Kolnai did not have aesthetics as a discipline in mind, nor was he thinking about art. Rather, he was calling attention to the propensity of this emotion to induce the subject to focus upon the presentational qualities of disgusting objects. Kolnai argues that the 'structure' of disgust contains a built-in aesthetic dimension made possible by the fact that disgust prompts attention to the qualities of the presentation of an object over and above the fact of its existence¹⁷. Consequently, when aroused, disgust manifests a pause during which one takes in the sensory properties of the revolting object. In contrast to fear, which is apt to induce rapid flight from the fearsome object, disgust provides opportunity for a second look. Since disgusting things are not immediately threatening, we have the leisure to take in their qualities and marvel at their appearance. One could object to this characterization, for disgusting objects certainly can be dangerous inasmuch as they are vectors for disease, but the point is that Kolnai recognized in the very structure of disgust an opportunity, a psychological space, for dwelling on the emotional experience. I see this as an opening to consider the possibilities of relishing, savoring, even at times enjoying the experience of disgust when it is aroused by art.

I pursue this point by zeroing in on just one aspect of the feeling of disgust: nausea, selected for its undeniable physical unpleasantness. Nausea is not the same as disgust, and one can be nauseated without being disgusted, as when suffering from food poisoning. Nausea is not itself an emotion, but it is one of the typical palpable signals of disgust, and many works provoke the feeling on purpose¹⁸. Therefore, it would seem that this aspect of disgust would never invite sa-

¹⁶ A. Kolnai, *On disgust*, ed. by B. Smith - C. Korsmeyer, Chicago, Open Court, 2004.

¹⁷ There is an echo here of Kant's first moment of beauty, wherein the subject has no interest in the existence of an object but only in its presentational form.

¹⁸ Kelly notes that the disgust response includes many physiological concomitants of nausea, both of which are correlated with activities in the so-called gustatory cortex.

voring; indeed, it would seem to be the very opposite of appreciative response. I am deliberately setting myself a difficult case by considering works that are nausea-inducing, but I believe that there are some examples that indicate the affective range of even this somatic response. And if such a case can be made for this highly unpleasant physical upheaval, it would open the way for granting aesthetic standing to the more complex emotion of disgust as a savorable, appreciative affect.

Sometimes nausea is simply a response to sensory disturbance. This can occur with the effects that some movies produce, as with jiggling hand-held cameras (for instance, *Rachel getting married*); or with special effects, such as the heaving waves of *The life of Pi*, winner of four Academy Awards, including Best Visual Effects (I myself spent about an hour in the theater feeling quite seasick). I would classify such visceral response as merely the result of sensory overload.

Here is a slightly more positive example: Sebastian Junger's book, *The perfect storm*, also made into a movie. (I choose the prose rather than the movie, because prose is by nature a less manipulative medium). I read this book with intense fascination, and at one point of especially rapt reading, I discovered that my living room was tilting. I had to put the book down for a while and let my dizziness subside. It was not pleasant at all, and I did not savor the feeling, but I was full of admiration that words on a page could produce this somatic effect, which was in perfect synchrony with the gripping narrative. But the nausea and the admiration were pretty distinct; you can't savor a sensation and try to reduce it at the same time. This example qualifies as a co-existentialist episode in which the nausea and the admiration are easily distinguished from one another.

Here is a third example, which unfortunately requires first-hand acquaintance for its impact: Rubens' giant painting *The feast of Herod* (1633). It hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, and, given the immense size of the piece (208 x 264 cm), it more or less has to be hung in a position that places John the Baptist's decapitated head in the range of adult eye-level. One immediately is confronted with a serving-platter holding a severed head, rendered in the greenish-gray of putrefying flesh. Queen Herodias daintily sticks a fork into the swollen protruding tongue as she casts a nasty smirk at her husband. If you have not been face to face with the original, it is hard to

imagine the gut response this work induces. Definite queasiness. But in this case, I – as well as other viewers with whom I have spoken – truly savored this sensation, returning to the image over and over to re-induce the uneasy stomach and the constriction of the throat it prompted. Not only a striking effect of the painter’s skill, this visceral response is an indispensable means of comprehending the horror of the terrible tale of revenge and the depth of meaning with which the grisly theme is charged¹⁹. Of course, this is more than a simple ‘gut reaction’. It prompts reflection on the meaning and implication of the image and its relation to the affective response it engenders. Appreciation and apprehension of art is often highly cognitive, by which I do not mean that we are instantly capable of formulating descriptive propositions about a work. Insight can come in less articulate forms, among them the emotions induced by art – including disgust.

I claim that in this case, the spasm of nausea and the savor – and by extension the disgust and the affective appreciation – are not only inseparable but one and the same. Not two components of appreciation but one complex one. And not a complex one with distinguishable elements that might be disassembled and examined separately, but one blended response that, should one try to separate its components, would lose its identity in some important way. The pause of disgust, as Kolnai describes it, not only permits but in this case actually compels us to linger over the horrid image as well as the response it arouses, including a weirdly appreciative nausea.

Although this case represents an exception to the general rule that disgust engenders repulsion, with such examples in mind, we might fine-tune our previous picture of emotions by regarding their intentional objects as themselves components of emotional episodes, such that feeling quality varies accordingly. On this model, not only do emotions respond to objects with a typical qualitative feeling, but also intentional objects reciprocate by tingeing the feeling quality of the emotion and filling-out the character of each emotion-event. This permits a high degree of variation for the experience of emotional ep-

¹⁹ Herodias commanded the head of John the Baptist as revenge for his criticism of her marriage to Herod. I thank Ivan Gaskell for informing me that Rubens alludes to St. Jerome’s claim in *Contra Rufinum* that Herodias pierced John the Baptist’s tongue with a fork, just as Fulvia had pierced Cicero’s tongue with a needle because she could not bear the truths he had spoken (private correspondence).

isodes. I posit that it sometimes allows aesthetic disgust to lose the characteristic impetus for recoil, permitting us to dwell within it and even to savor its abhorrent nature. Granted, inserting intentional objects into the identity of emotional episodes results in a somewhat unstable way to refer to emotions, since it emphasizes their degrees and variations rather than their common individual profiles. It is a rather messy picture, philosophically speaking, and it willingly violates my least favorite theoretical principle: parsimony. Art and life are complicated and often overrun the elegance of principles. Between preserving theoretical simplicity and recognizing the singular quality of emotional responses to powerful works of art, I opt for the latter.