

ON DISGUST: A MENIPPEAN INTERVIEW

Interview with Robert Wilson

This interview was originally conducted for the Brazilian publication, *Revista Galileu*. The interviewer was Juliana Tiraboschi. CRCL editorial team thought that the interview should be expanded. Accordingly, Irene Sywenky has posed additional questions. Nat Hardy reviewed *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust* in *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 32.2.

203

JT: Where does the title of your book comes from?

RRW: Gustave Moreau. The Art Institute of Chicago. But, remember, there are two parts to the title. The subtitle, "Imagining Disgust," points to my interest in how affects are imagined. This is the path into literature and film. I wanted to make *The Hydra's Tale* an exploration of the uses of the imagination, especially in creating visible forms for strong affects, such as disgust. The Hydra was the monster whom Herakles killed during his second Labour. She lived in the swamps at Lerna in Argos, near the well of Amymone, and was singular for having numerous heads, for being so monstrosly multiple. Appropriately for a monster who lives in a swamp, the Hydra was famous for her stench. Her blood was also poisonous. Accounts vary, occasionally giving the Hydra as many as 50 heads (and corresponding necks), but I assumed, for the purposes of discussion, a simpler version that gives her only nine heads and necks. I had in mind Moreau's 1876 painting, *Hercule et L'Hydre de Lerne* in the Art Institute of Chicago. (Moreau's painterly imagination gives the Hydra only seven heads. Along the painting's left edge, Herakles stands nearly naked, bearing his iconographic club and lion's skin in his right hand and his bow and arrows on his other side, gazing. The Hydra herself rises from a clutter of decaying bodies, tall and straight with a rather unorthodox nest of heads growing from her neck-body just beneath the central head. An uneven opening in the rocks behind her allows the eye to look beyond into the lowering horizon. It is an unmistakable female symbol, though the Hydra's female-ness could never be in doubt since she is, after all, a monster of fecundity, of excessive reproduction.) All the accounts agree that the heads grow quickly back once they have been severed. (In some versions, Herakles' nephew, Iolaus, finally sears each

neck with a burning torch, cauterizing the headless necks before they can regrow.) In this way, the Hydra seems to deform, even while representing, female fecundity: the lovely possibilities of gestation and growth made monstrous.

Like other fictional monsters, the Hydra can be made to symbolize a wide spectrum of acts. In quite complex ways, she evokes other monsters, including many, such as Mary Shelley's nameless para-human, who have emerged in literature only recently. If you recall that she is the granddaughter of Medusa (who had once lived happily, a beautiful young woman before

204 Athena transforms her) and that her blood lingers on the arrows that Philoctetes bears with him on Lemnos at the moment when a snake bites him and leaves him stinking from an incurable wound, then you may perceive the humanity that connects her, looking both before and after, with the humankind that she seems to deny. Her entire upper body recapitulates Medusa's snake-hair which, as Freud observes, symbolizes the "terror of castration." Barbara Creed, an Australian feminist critic, observes that Medusa's "entire visage is alive with images of toothed vaginas, poised and waiting to strike." No wonder, she adds, that male victims were "rooted to the spot with fear." When Herakles looks at the Hydra, he sees more than monstrousness, more even than physical danger. He sees a being who is at once female (and still human), but monstrously deformed, warped almost beyond recognition. His gaze is twisted, doubly braided you might say, around the monster's twofold significance: he is drawn towards the female creature who repels him. In Moreau's painting, the Hydra also represents the fragility of the human condition, how easily and swiftly it may become deformed, abruptly changed into monsterhood, but she also stands for the continuous thread that links monsters to ourselves, that continuum along which unfold the possibilities of transformation. On the Hydra's love-life, the mythographers are tongueless. I imagine that she loved, or might have loved, Herakles just as he may have loved her even in the act of killing. And this possibility underscores something important about disgust: you may be drawn, even while being repulsed, to the rot, decay, ruin and stench of disgusting things.

JT: What aspect of disgust is common to all human beings, apart from cultural differences?

RRW: It depends upon the intellectual discipline of the person you ask. Anthropologists often laugh when asked this question. Nothing, they insist, is common. There are only cultural differences, and these are radically distinct. Common phenomena between cultures will turn out to be artefacts of your perspective. Anthropologists do occasionally believe in universals, or what Donald E. Brown has called "human universals," but these are highly abstract, embodied differently in different cultural practices. Fear, linked directly to the amygdala, might be seen as a universal, but disgust, given the bewildering array of stimuli and empirical configurations, probably would not be. If you ask a psychologist, always an Euro-centric

breed, she will tell you that the face is common. There is, in this view, a “disgust face” in which the nose narrows (the nares constrict to prevent stench from entering) and the mouth pouts (the lips purse as if in the act of vomiting). The eyes will probably narrow as well, into slits to limit the person’s vision of the disgusting object. The hand may be extended, palm facing outwards. This is the “disgust face,” a human phenomenon that has been studied extensively, drawn and photographed. An anthropologist will simply say, “Crap!” Recently, Ian Hacking has put the problem in a nutshell: “Our idea of nature is not notably natural, let alone innate. . . .” Beyond the opposition between natural universals and cultural specificity, I can say only that transformation, metamorphosis and radical reformation seem commonplaces of all disgust phenomena. Beautiful objects and individuals become ugly and loathsome; wonderful food becomes excrement: rot, decay and ruin awaits everything. Well, that’s fairly obvious, though an anthropologist might argue that rot is not necessarily repulsive; it may even be attractive. After all, as Lévi-Strauss observes, humans often cook their food through the process of allowing it to rot. In writing *The Hydra’s Tale*, I took instruction from Sartre’s theory of the imagination: the uncertainty of form, the amorphous and anamorphic properties of objects, constitutes the grist, but also the product, of human imagination. A disgust-world (in literature, film or nightmare) is filled with corruption and shifting shapes: a world of deliquescence and amorphous being.

205

IS: What uses of cultural theory did you make?

RRW: Theory, whether cultural or not, tries to account for the human splash and plotch. However, I do not think that “cultural theory” is a single thing. Even in its multiplicity, theory can be at once satisfying and consoling. A student of mine, wholly dedicated to Paul de Man and his take upon Deconstruction, once told me that she had finally understood that there was “no way out of or around” Deconstruction. She spoke with intensity, commitment and conviction, in each word. She had found something, a theory, that made her happy. She reacted with considerable distance when I replied that all global theoretical models work that way: peremptory, dominating and masterful, poorly equipped with escape hatches, they account for all relevant data, solve all problems and make the theorist happy. She responded with even less enthusiasm when I suggest that in one version of cultural (and literary) theory, the search for theoretical solutions has been called “measuring the mandarin’s fingernails.” The theorist with the longest fingernails (so to speak) commands the most respect, the most marketable esteem and dominates, if neither for very long nor very steadily, the disciplinary field. (De Man’s nails were long indeed.) And so you see, I can hardly respond simply to a question about my uses of theory! In the study of culture, “theory” does offer ways to account for intractable problems (why do audiences consistently love TV that is terrible, under-plotted and filled with depthless characterization, such as “CSI” and “Law & Order”?). Still, it does so at a price:

the multiplicity of solutions can bring on dizziness. In literature, theory seems to mean whatever, in terms of declarative propositions and argument, bears upon a text in order to explain it, to make it clear, more certain, more definite. If we could agree to call such arguments “models” or even (extravagantly) “paradigms,” then we might also agree that, in the study of literature, theory is highly plural. (This is not quite the same things as saying that it is “pluralistic.” Pluralism is itself a definite model.) Through-out *The Hydra’s Tale*, I tried to show that disgust is far from simple and open to disparate accounts. I used theory, in this general sense, in three ways. First, I adopted an overall predisposition towards social constructionism, keeping it rather vaguely-defined, or “weak,” of the kind that many of us learned from Berger and Luckman in graduate school. I did not assume that disgust is ever absolute, or confined to any single aversive reaction, or ever defined, or identified, in the same way, or that any single theoretical model would, or could, explain it. Second, I did use specific theoretical models to deal with given tasks. Thus when I discuss literary texts, as when I analyze at length Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* in chapter seven, I approach the text as a literary formalist, in particular bringing my knowledge of narratology to the task. All my discussions of literary and filmic texts are narratological both in predisposition and in methodology: they seek identifiable parts, the inclusion of parts within parts, the communication between them (the logical relation of inclusion, say, or exclusion) and, in general, the bearing-upon-ness of parts). Third, I try to indicate the different theoretical models that would have significant bearing upon the problem I am discussing. In chapter five, I discuss the imagination and do so largely in terms of minimal narratives, small narratives, often non-verbal, that are embedded within larger narrative structures or else, like tattoos, inscribed upon the body. In chapter five, but not elsewhere, I draw upon the work of Edward S. Casey, a philosopher working with phenomenology, and M. M. Bakhtin. Tattoos are often carnivalesque, and because of this Bakhtin’s work has an important bearing upon their cultural significance. In chapter two, I attempt to identify the actual theoretical models that underlie other studies of disgust, or else which might have an explanatory bearing on other (future) studies of disgust. For example, it was clear to me that many studies of disgust, including Miller’s and Nussbaum’s, rely upon a proto-legal model and, in effect, dismiss other accounts. The proto-legal argument follows roughly the path of denying that laws could exist, or could have in any event a hold upon the community they regulate, unless the prohibited behaviours were felt, in advance of any laws, to be disgusting. Clearly, I do not believe this, though I do believe that it is an aspect of the solution to the problem of what disgust is and how it operates in a human society. I identify five such theoretical approaches to disgust, including Freud and Sartre. The approach that gave me the most pleasure to sketch was drawn from Georges Bataille: people often search out disgusting experiences in order to test themselves, to broaden their concept of selfhood, to learn from transgression and, in a word, to engage in self-creation. Finally, I must add that the singularity of the term “theory” in your question is intimidating. I think that there

are numerous theoretical models, each with some usefulness, none with the fool-proof hedgehog-like rotundity that my student found in Deconstruction. I also think that theory, whatever its specific incarnation, is an edgy business. It calls attention to edges: of words, of genres, of texts, of culture. All the animosities towards theory, as well as all the enthusiasms, respond to the metaphor of edges. (They might easily drive you over the edge, towards horror or bliss.) My student undoubtedly thought that she inhabited an edge, and clearly that she had the edge on me (a foxy old pluralist who had been forced to the edge of the rear-guard), an edge which she hoped to hone like a knife's-edge, slicing her way upwards to professional success.

JT: What impressed you most when studying disgust?

RRW: I was most impressed by metamorphosis: at the very core of all human experience there is transformation, whether rot or growth (sometimes both together). I was very strongly struck by the observation that human beings learn to accept disgust, to incorporate it into their intimate experiences. It is difficult to see how there could be doctors, nurses, policemen, firemen, soldiers, among many other professions, if it were not possible to transform initial reactions, such as revulsion and the "disgust face," into the mere stuff of daily life, or at least the second nature of work. In *The Hydra's Tale*, I give several examples of this learning-in-life process from my own experience. As a young man working in the Australian bush, I learned to eat meat that had been contaminated by flies, driving the maggots out of the food by keeping one edge of the skillet cooler than the spot where the meat had been placed, and I observed, without following, the practice of more experienced men who simply cooked the maggots along with the meat. Anyone who has lived and worked in a hot, rural environment may well have learned the same, or similar, lessons. Another personal experience that I discuss in the book involved an encounter with a woman in San Francisco who insisted that I urinate upon her. I found that request to be exceptionally repulsive, but, of course, I was very young at the time. Sexual experience often involves acts that might seem, from the outside at least, disgusting, but which become, with repetition (and, of course, mutual consent), quite acceptable, even desirable. A "golden shower" would be one of the milder examples. Still another level of transformation occurs when you learn how to turn disgust into symbolic content: the maggots in the meat become instances of life trying to preserve itself; the young woman desiring the sensation, the physical touch, of urine in her sexual experience becomes an example of desire attempting to surmount the rather poor opportunity that life has provided. That seems to be how the human imagination works. Everything, including even the most disgusting moments of rot and ruin, becomes, or can become, symbolic. One final example is the experience of contempt, or scorn. People often express contempt for something, or for another person, by displaying the "disgust face," or by insisting that certain words or acts disgust them. This is theatre, play and play-acting. It would not be possible unless the person expressing

contempt had already experienced actual, visceral disgust. Contempt is a psycho-intellectual affect that builds upon disgust, and the prior experience of disgust, by expanding it through symbolic accretions, such as literature, fantasy and (even) ideology. It is worth noting that some theorists of disgust, such as William Ian Miller, treat contempt as if it were, simply, disgust, or else equivalent to disgust. It is not: it is a more advanced, theatrical transformation of disgust into moral disapprobation and alienation. Contempt is symbolic behaviour on the level of personal encounter or as literary mockery. Menippean satire, one of my scholarly interests, is an excellent example of using physical disgust to mock, and to show contempt for, concepts and abstract intellectual positions.

IS: Can you say a bit more about Menippean Satire?

208 RRW: Edward Milowicki and I wrote about Menippean Satire, arguing to expand the definition away from its usual Classical norms into a “discourse,” a way of writing. It is an immensely diverse literary form (or non-form) that operates on all discursive levels: diction, style, theme, structure, (generic) form. We began by saying, it is “a will-o’-the wisp, the definition of Menippean satire seems always just beyond grasp.” That still strikes me as the case. Perhaps the best way to begin to work out a definition would be to acknowledge that Menippean Satire has its origins in Old Comedy—a ribald and rambunctious deformation of reality in which recognizable people are reduced to absurdity. A subsequent tradition grew up from the works of the Cynic philosopher, Menippus, none of which remain extant, and was developed further by other Greek writers, primarily Diogenes of Sinope, and then by Roman satirists, such as Marcus Terentius Varro. Although such satire is always hard-hitting, raw and reductive, it is also intensely literary and philosophical. Three possible lines of approach to a definition are possible. First, Menippean Satire typically finds expression in a mixed style, prose and verse intermingling. It was largely this element of Menippean writing that led Bakhtin to argue that it was the precursor of the novel as a form (or a non-form) and of its “double-voiced” discourse in particular. Menippean discourse absorbs elements of other genres in order to test philosophical propositions. An inventory of such mingled borrowings in any Menippean text would be immense and varied. Multi-discourse writing typifies modern novels: anything can belong. Even an interview such as this one, exploiting a peculiarly modern fascination with what authors *really* think, is quite Menippean: two women, unknown to each other, working in two different countries, in different hemispheres, interview a person who answers on different levels, including theory and personal anecdote. (If, at this point, I were to insert a ribald poem I could make this interview *more* Menippean, but even without the poem it is quite Menippean.) Second, Menippean Satire involves an extraordinary number of differing motifs, many of them loathsome and disgusting. No characteristic of a literary form is so definite, so bound to genre or normal reception, that it cannot be incorporated into Menippean writing.

Third, Menippean Satire is, despite its ribald proclivities and gross insults, highly intellectual. Garry Sherbert writes that it is a “kind of intellectual prose satire” that parodies prevailing forms of “learned discourse.” As such, it is both very conceptual, using learned wit to combat learned wit, a philosopher’s discourse, and irreducibly self-conscious. Milowicki and I argue that, as a way of writing, Menippean is more than satire and much more than a Classical form. (It is typical of many scholars writing on Menippean Satire that they argue, and claim to believe, that it only occurs in Classical texts.) It is a kind of discourse, a way of writing, that may never exist in a pure form (whatever that might be), but only, and always, as a subordinate part of another kind of writing.

IS: Is there a real difference between disgust as a visceral reaction to in-the-world objects and disgust as a moral judgment? Could you relate your answer to your theory of Menippean discourse?

209

RRW: I think that there is. Human beings (can) experience a number of immediate visceral reactions to aversive stimuli. Fear is the most obvious example, but revulsion would certainly belong in the inventory. Aversion is the root affect in disgust, becoming transformed, as disgust, into a vast number of extravagant behaviours. I am not certain that aversion, or for that matter any visceral affect, is ever without cultural mediation. An argument could be made that no human affect engages stimuli without mediation. However, leaving that problem aside, I feel confident in holding that fear is less mediated than aversion. Different cultures make possible different aversions. (Whereas all dogs and all cats seem to have pretty much the same aversions.) Even within a single culture, where you grow up seems to determine which things will most prompt your aversive capacities. If you have grown up on a farm, it is probable that raw or rotting flesh, maggots, and all the other handmaidens of decay, will affect you less than they would someone who has been raised in a city. In *The Hydra’s Tale*, I refer to disgust as a psycho-visceral affect; that is, it is certainly there in your gut, chyme rising up your throat, pushing your lips apart, but it is also in the mind as well. There are also psycho-intellectual affects, of which contempt is an excellent example, where the visceral affect underlies, and makes possible, a much more highly elaborated, and inevitably theatrical affect. Contempt, however genuine the underlying aversion, is a kind of play-acting, a let’s-pretend demonstration that someone, or someone’s ideas, are disgusting, and, above all, an enactment of moral disapprobation. It isn’t actually disgust, but disgust underlies it and makes it possible. The human mind, as Martha Nussbaum argues, possesses an intricate, many-layered “archaeology” in which deeply-buried beliefs, false assumptions and misconstructions all play roles. Even in the moment when it is most keenly felt, an affect is a palimpsest of past moments. Memories of previous experience, tentacular and persistent, shadow the present. Nothing in the mind is ever so deeply buried that it cannot return. And much of what returns is fantasy: imaginative sketches of what

might have been or, still, could be. The past is always there like an inscription upon the body written in unseeable ink, a public declaration (which you may only slowly, and painfully, learn to read) that makes plain your reasons, if not your guilt. Other psycho-intellectual affects, such as love and hate, sorrow and remorse, or longing and nostalgia, manifest the same archeological structure. The transformation of lust into love, say, follows the pattern of disgust into contempt. Take nostalgia as an example. People miss places, other people, sights and experiences. They may well long for these missing, but one-time present, aspects of their lives. Depending on their education, their capacity for imaginative acts, the kinds of cultural mediation available, they may transform their primitive affect, longing, into a theatrical structure of displacement and compensation. Leo Spitzer's *Hotel Bolivia* is one of my favourite studies of nostalgia. The Jewish community in La Paz, most of whom were refugees from the Anschluss, attempted to recreate Austria in the Andean altiplano. This involved attempts to eat, dress and create entertainment as they had in Austria prior to March

210 1938. They managed to build a short-lived, but fulfilling, replica community, minus anti-Semitism and Nazism, in the midst of La Paz. I know La Paz fairly well, and I can say that little seems to remain of this exercise in nostalgia, but I can imagine it. It was a magnificent monument to human desire and intelligence during its brief, like all nostalgia, existence. And so, yes, I see a significant difference between visceral and intellectual manifestations of the same root affect. As far as Menippean discourse goes, there is an analogous archeology, transforming many aspects of experience, not simply root affects, into elaborate structures of mockery, but it is literary. Hence the Menippean archeology of the affects is at once momentary, an act of textual creation, and permanent, an act of reading and reiteration.

JT: You say in your book that, like consciousness, disgust is highly metamorphic, and that the history of disgust would reveal an overlapping history of consciousness. Can you tell me more about the link between disgust and consciousness?

RRW: "Consciousness" is a highly contentious term. Philosophers often deny that such a thing exists. Once at an international conference, a man distinguished for his work in artificial intelligence replied to a question I had posed by saying that his robots had as much consciousness as I did. He did not mean that as an insult (I believe), but only as a statement of fact. However, I have used the term much as I do "imagination" (another contentious term) to describe what appears to be a mental function or a nexus of interacting functions. Certain kinds of mental work are accomplished, such as being self-aware or capable of bringing memory to bear upon present experience (as contempt builds upon visceral disgust) in such a way that the mind seems to operate on different levels, or with different tasks, in the same moment. The archeology of affects that Nussbaum describes occurs, and could only occur, within consciousness. Let me give an example from the discussion of disgust: shame. People look back upon certain acts and performances and regret them. They may feel that what they once

did was ugly, contemptible and, in a single word, shameful. Shame follows behind any person's experience howling in disgust's paw-prints. I discuss in the book how I felt shame, overpowering and mind-filling, after my encounter with the woman who desired a golden shower. The odd aspect of that experience was that I felt shame for the act, but also for not having performed it properly, not as the woman might have desired. I felt shame on two levels, both united in memory but balanced in opposition by rational analysis and corresponding images. Disgust inhabits consciousness, giving shape(s) to desire, loathing and terror. Outside of human consciousness, there could only be *mere* aversion and rejection.

IS: In your initial response in this interview, you identified a "path" into your discussion that was concerned with literature and film. Can you say more about this path? Are certain literary works and films entirely disgusting or do they simply make extensive use of disgust motifs?

211

RRW: I think that two separate problems are at issue here. First, certain works of fiction and (possibly) film create worlds that seem entirely filled with representations of disgust. They are crowded, even drenched, in disgust. As a consequence, they evoke fictional worlds that seem to be dominated by disgust; in effect, they create disgust-worlds. Second, many works of fiction and most horror films, employ disgust motifs. Louis Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* strikes me as nearly a complete disgust-world as could be imagined. (Even the title, with its dark pun, contributes to the systematic topology of the world evoked.) Other works of fiction exist, such as William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, that seem created primarily to evoke a thorough-going disgust-world (for whatever purposes), but Céline's novel adequately exemplifies the distinction. It is more difficult to find a film that builds an exclusively disgust-filled world, but several of David Lynch's films do come close. His 1977 *Eraserhead* is close to a complete disgust-world. One reason that it is difficult to point out a complete disgust-world in film is that so much happens, in each frame, on the screen. It is always possible to draw back into psychical distance and engage in aesthetic contemplation. It is much easier to identify disgust motifs in films and show how they work (to define character, establish theme, enhance situations, and so forth). In *The Hydra's Tale*, I discuss several horror films to show how various disgust motifs, such as slime or dripping mucoid liquids, establish a trail towards the revelation of horror. Most horror films employ sequential revelations, a series of small horrors, that lead up to a final experience of fear, loathing and hair-bristling horror. All four of the *Alien* follow this structure of small revelations, usually something wet and dripping, leading towards a final episode of maximum horror. In the book, I attempted, not as successfully as I had hoped, to distinguish disgust motifs in horror films from similar motifs in terror films. While in horror films disgust motifs form a sequence, a narrative path, leading to the final revelation of horror, in terror films they explode radially, at once widely and grotesquely dispersed, to show the

maximum weight of the terrible event that has just happened. In either case, horror or terror, disgust motifs are immensely powerful. I have known people, including professors of Literature, who have been raised in strict religious environments, or who have been taught inflexible moral codes, who can only read for content. They are usually given to paraphrase and formulaic judgments. ("Chit-chat," in Northrop Frye's phrase.) Content-oriented readers may find a single disgust motif too much to bear—they will close a book without finishing it or walk out of a cinema before a film ends. I have seen it happen. Even when disgust motifs appear in fiction or film in ways that are very far from constituting a disgust-world, they can be disturbing, even shocking, in their capacity to evoke deliquescence and dissolution.

JT: Ultimately, did you find any one thing, or any single experience, to be most disgusting? Is anything so overwhelmingly disgusting that it stands above all others?

212 RRW: Any answer would have to be highly personal and tied to the intellectual discipline within which it is given. A psychologist might well say that the most disgusting things are those which are perceived to spread pollution—a cockroach, say, or contaminated food. An anthropologist would probably argue that the most disgusting thing is what, in any specific culture, the most offensive "dirt out of place" (in Helen Douglas' phrase). A theologian might wish to claim that blasphemy, or any violation of a religious taboo, is always the most disgusting act. Such acts pollute the sacred; they subvert the boundaries that protect the precincts of a deity, or some other order of *mysterium*, from intrusion. A filmographer might argue that the most disgusting image is one that creates a *frisson* of horror. (Your hair should stand on end and your blood run cold.) Swarms are integral to the concept of horror, and in particular horror films. "The Naked Jungle" (1954) with its unending swarm of army ants, or "Starship Troopers" (1997), presenting an entire planet populated by vast swarms of diverse insect species, illustrate the point. I found both films to be rather tense viewing. My personal view is that nothing is more disgusting than a swarm. A single cockroach, or a single maggot, would bother me very little, but a swarm of them would fill me with loathing and visceral revulsion. This may be because swarms are inherently ugly and loathsome—vast numbers, mobs and swarms, distort individual identity—, but it may also be because there are definite physical associations, exploited in most horror literature and film, such as crawling, creeping and slithering (over your body) that are commonly experienced when covered by swarms. My own loathing for swarms has something to do with my personal experience of spider-swarms when I was only four. I thrust my hand into a spider's nest and thousands of newly-hatched spiderlings raced up my arm and crawled beneath my clothing. I could *feel* them on my body. Since that moment I have always sought to avoid swarms. They remind me, and perhaps everyone, of how disgusting reiteration can be. I have similar feelings about religious and political swarms of people, people shouting in unison or moving mindlessly with a single purpose, their identities flattened, themselves

de-individuated. A reader of Elias Canetti, I find crowds, manipulated for religious or ideological ends, intensely loathsome. Note that my answer applies to both visceral disgust and to intellectual, or moral, disgust. An idea decomposed and then reconstituted as a swarm, as catch-phrases, slogans and war-cries, is disgusting. The pattering of repetition, no matter what the idea, is very much like a swarm of cockroaches.

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