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## The Disgust Taboo, and the Omnipresence of Disgust in Aesthetic Theory

In the short essays in footnote form that Johann Adolf Schlegel attached to his translation (1751; second edition, 1759) of *Les beaux arts réduits en un même principe* by Charles Batteux, “disgust”—*Ekel* (or *Eckel*)—is defined, for the first time in full, systematic sharpness, as the outer limit of the aesthetic: “Disgust alone is excluded from those unpleasant sensations whose nature can be altered through imitation. Art would here fruitlessly expend all its labor.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the disgusting is so powerfully repellent that it even checks the reflexion on its abject nature: “We are scarcely inclined to consider why the disgusting always repulses, even in the form of artistic imitation.”<sup>2</sup> Once defined as a concept, however, “disgust” proved highly useful, even indispensable, for articulating the difference between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic. As a term, the concept thus evaded the very exclusion to which it was subjected: “I dare hope,” Moses Mendelssohn writes on February 14, 1760, in his “82nd Letter Regarding Literature,” “that you are not so delicate as to shy away from such an examination. Therefore I shall venture, indeed, on a closer consideration of the nature of *Eckel*.”<sup>3</sup>

In a discrete manner, the insinuation here of delicacies to be avoided conveys one of the intricate linguistic peculiarities rendering *Ekel* (*Eckel*) “one of the most striking words in [the German] language.”<sup>4</sup> In the eighteenth century: “to be *eckel*” denoted both that which repels and the (too) ticklish, (too) delicate sensibility, which (too) easily allows itself to be repelled by something. This double application of being “eckel” to both object and subject leads to a blockade of possible insight *vis-à-vis* disgust. Only those who are themselves not (too) *eckel* can attain insight into the “nature of *Eckel*.” Lessing, Herder, and Kant followed Mendelssohn’s “I shall indeed venture it.” The 1760s thus

saw the emergence of the first veritable theoretical debate over disgust, with numerous examples serving as canonized points of reference. For a foundational moment in the history of aesthetics, culminating in the reflections on disgust in paragraph 48 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, establishment of the aesthetic and of ideal beauty, on the one hand, and insight into the "nature of disgust," on the other, were two facets of the same endeavor. (There is no equivalent to this in French or English aesthetics. In a few passages, Addison and Diderot speak of "disgust"<sup>5</sup> and *dégoût*.<sup>6</sup> But these concepts neither possess the prominent systematic value nor share the specifically philosophical semantics that "disgust" comes to assume in the German aesthetic tradition.)

### THE BEAUTIFUL AS VOMITIVE

Disgust's astonishing career already begins, in fact, at the center of the beautiful itself. In its virtually exclusive focus on the extreme countervalues to beauty, the explicit debate that originated in the 1750s conceals this cardinal locus of *Eckel*. A disgusting menace inherent in beauty itself fully emerges only outside the confines of the more narrowly defined debate. The "82nd Letter Regarding Literature" does at least hint at a form of disgust elicited by beauty; but it does so only under the rubric of a disgust at the merely pleasant and at "excessive sweetness." The mixed sensations, which transform unpleasant objects and sensations into sources of aesthetic pleasure, are superior to "purest enjoyment"<sup>7</sup> because they provide an enlivening sollicitation of our sensitivity to a heightened degree by means of changing sides—of performing a trajectory with a considerable amplitude of tension. This theorem can be reformulated inversely so that the role of disgust becomes apparent: the cumulation of unadulterated pleasantness passes over, through its own dynamic, into that quantitative sort of disgust connected to the feeling of (over)satiation: "What is merely pleasant soon produces satiation, and finally *Eckel*. . . . By contrast, the unpleasant that is mixed with the pleasant seizes our attention, preventing all too early satiation. Daily experience with those tastes that are sensual shows that pure sweetness soon leads to *Eckel*."<sup>8</sup> Other authors diagnose such an inherent reversal into displeasure and disgust for *all* "pleasing" feelings, explicitly including the sensation of the beautiful. In his *Essay on Human Knowledge*, Johann Karl Wezel writes as follows:

Pain, particularly physical pain, tautens the nerves. Only when it reaches a very high pitch and lasts too long, does it cause the nerves to slacken. On the other hand, we cannot experience any sort of pleasant sensations for long without the organs being exhausted: surfeit and disgust [*Ueberdruß und Eckel*] are the constant companions of such sensations.<sup>9</sup>

All of us will have enjoyed, or experienced pleasure, at having our skin stroked by a tender hand or being gently tickled—at having our nerves soothed by a soft tone, a mild color, a moderately sweet smell. But as soon as the loveliest smell or color exceeds a certain level . . . it becomes oppressive and unenjoyable, thus producing displeasure.<sup>10</sup>

Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst* (1740) already applies the special structure of quantitative disgust from (over)satiation to poetic *elocutio*: "In the same way that immoderate lavishing of spices only spoils dishes and awakens *Eckel*, a glut of flowers and ornaments stifle the beauty of a work's material."<sup>11</sup> In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1766), Kant approaches social life and the relations between the sexes along the same lines: "In France, the woman sets the tone in all companies and all society. Now it can scarcely be denied that without the beautiful sex, social gatherings are rather savorless and boring; but if women supply them with a tone of beauty, it is up to men to supply a tone of nobility. Otherwise, social intercourse becomes equally boring, but for opposite reasons: because nothing evokes as much disgust as sheer sweetness."<sup>12</sup> Without beauty, savorlessness and boredom triumph; dominated by the beautiful sex alone, social intercourse is "equally boring," and even disgusting. Contemporary aesthetic theory provides, precisely, an exit between these poles of savorless absence and disgusting presence of the beautiful. The aporia's solution involves an imperative of *mandatory supplementation*: in order to be and remain beautiful, the beautiful has an innate need for completion through something other than it—through something non- or not-only-beautiful. This supplement comes under a variety of names: "grace," "calm grandeur" (*stille Größe*), "solemnity" (*Ernst*)—or simply "soul" (*Seele*). In Kant's "social" example, this law of mandatory supplementation reads thus: the feminine "beautiful tone" needs the counterweight of a tone that is masculinely "noble," in order not to be filled with boredom and disgust out of "pure sweetness."

Alongside the satietory values of sheer sweetness, wearying repetition, and all-too-exhaustive elaboration, one paradigm of *Eckel* above all assumes a leading role in the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Its material is found, once again, outside the confines of the more narrowly defined aesthetic debate. It is the disgust from sexual fulfillment. The problematic, disgust-endangered moment of satiation is not the "enough" of joyful satisfaction, but the "too much" unfolding in just that satietory moment—namely, to the extent that the object of already fulfilled desire offers itself to further consumption. One piece of sugar too many, continued sexual suggestion converging with just-quenched longing—and satiety threatens to emerge from the joy of satiation. Satiety disgust is thus basically disgust from excess or overfulfillment. Spinoza formulated this point with great acuity: "One further point should be observed

concerning love. It frequently happens, while we are enjoying what we were seeking, that from that very enjoyment the body changes to a new condition, as a result of which it is differently determined and different images are activated in it, and at the same time the mind begins to think of and desire other things." When, however, the "old" object presses us to further consumption, a conflict emerges between past and present desire; in the realm of sexuality just as in that of food, this can result in a state of "disgust" and "repugnance": "while we are enjoying food we were seeking, the stomach is being filled and the body is changing its condition. If therefore, with the body now in a different condition, the image of the said food is fostered by its being set before us, and consequently also the conatus or desire to eat the food, this conatus, or desire, will be opposed by the new condition of the body, and consequently the presence of the food which we used to want will be hateful, and this is what we call Satiety (*fastidium*) and Disgust (*taedium*)."<sup>14</sup>

Even when later authors cross the threshold of "enough" without plunging into disgust, excess thus being joyously affirmed, Spinoza's observation remains a model for both the avoidance of disgust at excess and the inversion of such disgust into pleasure. Barthes thus writes of a language of love allowing us to "leave every satisfaction" behind us and "transgress the bounds of satiation," without paying the price of *dégoût* and *nausée*.<sup>15</sup> And Benjamin offers an account of a form of voracity that only discovers its own terrain through victory over the disgust of satiety: "And then came the pass-heads of taste, upon which, once excess and disgust—the last curves—are conquered, the view opens up onto an unheard of gustatory landscape: a pale flood of desire without threshold . . . the full transformation of pleasure into custom, custom into vice."<sup>16</sup>

An elaborate "map" of love from 1777 very precisely marks the shift from satiation to disgust: on the one hand, the province of "satiation" still lies in "the land of happy love"; on the other, it neighbors directly on "*Eckel*."<sup>17</sup> According to Kant, disgust generally threatens the "vulgar acquaintance" with sexual fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> Among the many pre-Kantian articulations of sexual disgust, let us here simply note Shakespeare's famous misogynist variant.<sup>19</sup> For Shakespeare, *sex disgust* and *sex nausea* are the "natural" fate of male desire. The highest praise he can accord Cleopatra thus centers on her ability to avoid sexual satiety—and hence satietary disgust—through the art of endless variation. As one commentator puts it, "For the lover of Cleopatra there is no sexual disillusionment, no depression or depletion, and every time is as the first time: 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety: other women cloy/The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/Where most she satisfies.'<sup>20</sup> "Disgust satiates," it suppresses all appetite, Kant would say later;<sup>21</sup> but contrary to Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra, he is in fact subscribing to the conventional motto for avoiding satiety: "abstain or infinitize foreplay."<sup>22</sup>

Endless variation and foreplay: in eighteenth-century aesthetics these antidotes to sexual disgust become constitutive elements of aesthetic experience. At the very moment when the beautiful is first and thoroughly subjectified, being defined as a special sort of pleasure (*Vergnügen, plaisir*), rules for avoiding satiation, developed for the pleasures of eating as well as of social and sexual intercourse, are extended into the field of this new aesthetic pleasure. There they institute the genuinely modern law of an “aesthetic” *infinity* that thwarts any closure. Henceforth, even art is meant to offer only those pleasures capable of yet further elevation and/or an open-ended process of reflective consummation. In contrast, bringing the beautiful to the edge of “excessive sweetness” and “purest pleasure” would mean seeing it turn into disgust. Kant generalized this rule to a “chief maxim” of all behavior:

Whatever the path may be upon which one seeks pleasure: it is . . . a principal maxim to apportion it in such a way that one can always heighten its experience; for to be satiated by it produces that condition of disgust [*ekelnden Zustand*] which renders life itself a burden to spoiled people, and consumes women under the name of the vapors.<sup>23</sup>

Following a pair of long dashes, Kant comes out promptly with an ironclad recipe for success: “Young man (I repeat): enjoy your work! Do not place a check on *pleasures* in order to *renounce* them, but in order to reserve always as much of them as possible for future prospects.” The recipe of “autonomous” aesthetics is no different: it propagates a “prospective” pleasure that can be infinitely elevated, a kind of everlasting *Vor-Lust*—or more exactly: an endless foreplay that turns into an endless afterplay without any excess or peak in between. Such a diet alone offers protection from satiation, and consequently from disgust at the “highest pleasure,” “pure beauty” and “unadulterated sweetness.” It alone prevents an immanent transformation of the beautiful into a vomitive. The aesthetic provides the unique kind of pleasure that by its own rules (which are not identical with the nature of the beautiful, but rather subject to a dietetic regime) conforms to the law prescribing exclusively non-finite forms of fulfillment. Aesthetic pleasure is aesthetic only to the extent that it inherently respects this law, whereas the other types of pleasure have no built-in features through which they can structurally avoid the self-destructive turn upon reaching the point of satiation.

With utmost precision, Lessing’s famous rule of the “fruitful moment” [*fruchtbarer Augenblick*] renders the anthropological-aesthetic principle of avoiding satiation into an artistic imperative. It prescribes always avoiding the “climax” within “the full course of an affect.” “The imagination” is only granted “free play” through such a ban on maximum satiation, which enables us to “add all the more” in imagination, or “thinking.” Lessing promptly spells

out the dangerous sensation his rule is meant to avoid: “that finally we feel disgusted with the entire object.”<sup>24</sup> Aesthetic pleasure, then, does not allow an exhaustive, maximally fulfilling representation; it requires, instead, an economy of reserve: the retention of open possibilities for intensification, or of a “stairway” always offering another step to climb. The new discipline of aesthetics calls for virtuosos of infinite foreplay. This infinitely open process of fulfillment implies an equally infinite process of nonfulfillment. The aesthetic realm is thus grounded in an abysmal assumption: the beautiful tends in itself to become disgusting, hence to pass over into its extreme opposite; by virtue of its innate features, it is threatened with the danger of unexpectedly revealing itself as something *vomitiv*e. Laconically, the early Kant confirmed that “the very thing which is beautiful evokes disgust” (*die Sache selbst vereckelt die da schön ist*)—unless, Kant adds, it is mixed with something different.<sup>25</sup> And in another passage:

[The beautiful] causes the soul as it were to melt in a soft sentiment, and by slackening the nerves sets all the feelings into a gentler emotion which, however, if carried too far, is transformed into lassitude, satiety, and disgust.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Kant diagnosed an “admixture of disgust” in every strong “enjoyment of the senses”—with one remarkable exception and outer limit: “Under conditions of good health, the greatest enjoyment of the senses not accompanied by any admixture of disgust, is *rest after labor*.”<sup>27</sup> The Protestant ethics of this sentence are deeply inscribed within the very foundations of aesthetics, namely in theories of the beautiful and of aesthetic pleasure. In Kant’s “rest after labor,” labor resounds *ad infinitum*; rather than comprising an autonomous, sensual self-presence, the sensual enjoyment of this “rest” is also, always, the enjoyment of “work” that has been accomplished. The unadulterated self-presence of “enjoyment of the senses” would involve its shift into the negative form of experiencing intimate presence: into disgust. As an antidote to the inherent danger of disgust, the theory of aesthetic pleasure similarly stipulates a potentially endless labor of the understanding—a labor that simultaneously figures as basis, motor, and content of aesthetic experience. Within this model, *Ekel* is both lower and upper limit, adversary and innate tendency of the beautiful. Though the aesthetic debate on *Ekel* emphasizes almost exclusively its role of being the extreme opposite of the aesthetic, disgust thus proves to be, even while placed under a ban, to be constitutive for the beautiful in a double manner. Between the contradictory sentences “the very thing which is beautiful evokes disgust” and “nothing is more opposed to the beautiful than disgust,”<sup>28</sup> the new discipline of aesthetics demarcates its space and its ideal. Referring to Goethe’s “beautiful silhouette in complete form,” Kafka once echoed this basic argument of classical aesthetics, ironically

applying it to the classicist aesthetic itself: "Goethe's beautiful silhouette in complete form. Secondary impression of repugnance at the sight of this consummate human body, since surmounting this level [of perfection] is beyond the imaginable."<sup>29</sup> At the same time, disgust at beauty itself opens a perspective upon the category of *kitsch*: According to Adorno, *kitsch* is that type of the beautiful that "contradicts" itself precisely due to "the absence of its own opposite," or that turns into something "ugly," because it is not contaminated by something dissonant and other than itself.<sup>30</sup>

### AESTHETIC INFINITY AS ANTIVOMITIVE

Art thus needs to master equally both the advantages and the deficits of the beautiful. Something in the beautiful itself demands supplementation through a not-beautiful: a contamination blocking the disgusting satiety that arises, precisely, from the purely and unadulterated beautiful. From their very inception, both the emerging "discipline" of aesthetics and the classical ideal of art respond to this danger of pure beauty. Baumgarten's notion of perfect sensual cognition postulates a form of perception that, while marked by clarity and exerting a striking effect on the senses, never achieves the distinctness of theoretical cognition because of its excessive endowment with sensual traits. This absence of distinctness grants aesthetic perception a capacity to draw ever more distinctions, ad in(de)finitem; it thus blocks arrival at any maximum value of full satiation. Winckelmann formulated an analogous rule:

A beautiful face is pleasing, but will be more stirring when endowed, through a certain reflective bearing, with a quality of seriousness. . . . All stimuli achieve duration through enquiry and reflection, and that which is discretely pleasing invites deeper study. A beauty endowed with seriousness will never leave us completely sated and satisfied, but rather with the expectation of ever-new enticements; such is the particular distinction of Raphael's beauties, and those of the old masters.<sup>31</sup>

Whether the beautiful's supplement is named "truth" or "gravity," beauty requires a not (simply) beautiful moment, so that its "enticements" can take on duration—instead of leaving us "sated and satisfied." Already several years before similar reflections by Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Herder, Winckelmann had expressly named this satietary value *Ekel*, touching discretely on sexual disgust as its paradigm:

All delights, including those robbing the greatest number of human beings of that unrecognized great treasure, time, gain their

endurance and protect us from *Ekel* and satiety, to the extent that they engage our understanding. Merely sensual feelings, however, are only skin deep, and have little effect on the understanding.<sup>32</sup>

For a painting whose charms exhaust themselves in “a short time,” Winckelmann occasionally also uses the metaphor of that “lower sense” constituting the disgust-sense par excellence: such a painting “appears to have been made for the sense of smell.”<sup>33</sup> Sensations of smell, taste, and touch are fleeting, they are bound to the here and now, and cannot be reflectively rendered infinite. Winckelmann’s postulate that “a painting must permanently please” can thus only be satisfied by those senses capable of establishing inner connections with the “understanding.” Along with transcending the sensory experience of disgust, this rule transcends the field of pure sensory experience in general. From now on, the aesthetic enters into narrow cooperation with the reflective understanding: senses and understanding are configured in such a manner that a virtual and nonterminable process of “information enrichment” unfolds. As a thoroughly finite defense reaction, as spontaneous as it is brief and as violent as it is decisive, disgust allows no room for reflection: all the less so for a type of reflection affirming its own nonterminability and undecidability. If the insertion of infinite reflection into aesthetic experience is one of the cardinal innovations from Baumgarten to Kant and Friedrich Schlegel, vomiting from disgust serves as that innovation’s negative definitional model: an indigestible block of nonreflective finitude and decision.

To employ the understanding while resisting any finite, exhaustive determination by it: that is also Kant’s formula for introducing the aesthetic idea, a paradoxical term serving as a means of successfully—and structurally—avoiding disgust. By an aesthetic idea, Kant means “a presentation by the imagination that prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever (i.e., no [determinate] *concept*), can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.”<sup>34</sup> This idea is aesthetic precisely to the degree that it “opens a view upon a boundless realm of related impressions,”<sup>35</sup> thus maintaining its own unreachability for every finite interpretation. Put otherwise: aesthetic pleasure only remains pleasure if something remains to intensify or to discover—something postponing the maximal satietory value ad in(de)finitem through an unterminable employment of the understanding. Whenever, to the contrary, the aesthetic is “merely” centered on a self-exhausting “pleasure” (*Genuß*) and “leaves nothing behind in the idea,” its “object gradually [becomes] disgusting.”<sup>36</sup> From here emerges the tension which characterizes the foundational structure of the entire *Critique of Judgment*. On the one hand, the beautiful is meant to please free of all interest; on the other hand, only those taking an “intellectual interest in the beautiful” are immune to the dangers of the “vanity” and vapidly routinely affecting the purely aesthetic “virtuosi of taste.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the beautiful is meant to



please free of all concepts, while, on the other hand, it is linked to undetermined, and hence infinitely determinable, concepts. By his own account, Kant is here “impairing” the same “pureness” of the beautiful he lays out in such uncompromising fashion.<sup>38</sup> Ubiquitously, such impairment serves to increase the powers of aesthetic judgment through its contamination. Such contamination alone orients aesthetic experience toward infinite satisfaction; and it can do so only by generating an infinite deferment of a simultaneously complete and distinct comprehension that would “leave us completely sated and satisfied”—and hence on the verge of being disgusted. To a considerable extent, the often-conjured inexhaustibility and indeterminacy of aesthetic experience can thus be read as a remedy to the radical finiteness of disgust, since disgust not only defines and threatens the aesthetic realm from the outside, but, due to beauty’s self-sickening tendency, has always already infiltrated its interior structure. This prominent feature of the new aesthetics inaugurated by Baumgarten furnishes an urgently needed *antivomitive*: an apotropaic response to the disgust of satiation that results from the unmixed and uncontaminated beautiful.

#### “MIXED SENSATIONS” AND THE EXCEPTION OF DISGUST

Ancient ‘theories’ of the beautiful only occasionally touch on art, and do not form part of a specifically aesthetic discourse. In contrast, the modern elaboration of aesthetics into an independent ‘discipline’ is aimed at the isolation of phenomenal zones and subjective forms of experience that are first and foremost aesthetic—and nothing else. More than a hundred treatises on the beautiful accompany the phenomenon defined in the language of systems theory as the differentiation of art into an autopoietic subsystem. Although doubtless it is this system’s highest programmatic value, its “ideal,” the beautiful never figures as its exclusive principle player. Rather, the field of the aesthetic always covers more ground than just the beautiful. Indeed, precisely this incongruity prompts the aesthetic reflection to define the beautiful’s *trans*-aesthetic and *inner*-aesthetic boundaries and supplements. Alongside the danger of disgust elicited by beauty itself, this becomes especially apparent in the marked importance accorded the problem of aesthetic pleasure at unpleasant objects. From the late seventeenth-century to Dubos and Batteux, and onward to Burke, Mendelssohn, and Lessing, aesthetic theory consistently addresses the paradoxical pleasure at the representation of all sorts of horror, including the pleasure taken in the representation of ugly, gruesome, and revolting objects or events.

Aristotle’s intellectualizing explanation for the pleasure taken at horror<sup>39</sup>—a problem that has gained fresh topicality over recent decades—did not at all satisfy the eighteenth-century aestheticians. If this pleasure were in

fact merely grounded in the “illusory,” technically successful and hence beautiful imitation of horrible events, it would—when compared with the synergetic energy released by the beautiful imitation of the beautiful—be always merely a partial and hence partly deficient pleasure, or from Lessing’s perspective, even a double displeasure.<sup>40</sup> Lucretius’s topos of the shipwreck with spectators has comprised a second traditional explanation.<sup>41</sup> But it, as well, presents little more than pleasure at intellectual distance: we are pleased because as mere spectators we are ourselves safe, or because we can withdraw from aesthetic horror into our actual intactness. The “empathy” doctrine of the “moral sense” philosophers offers the inverse of this Lucretian model: we feel pleasure at horror because it sparks empathy with the victim, thus allowing us to sense our own humanity. To be sure, this doctrine also has palliative and apotropaic elements, it also evokes a dynamic of defensive pleasure; but the sort of positive affect resulting from horror itself conforms far more closely with the standards set for explaining the pleasure taken in horror by its most advanced eighteenth-century advocates. How is it conceivable that in art, unpleasant events *in themselves* spark pleasure—and not simply their distancing as something unreal? And further: why *must* art, in its own interest, not limit itself to beautiful “objects” when aspiring to furnish a pleasure as intense and enduring as possible?

The theory of the violently agitated passions in the tradition of Dubos and Burke ascribes the same salutary effect to tragedy’s artificial horrors, and to the real ones at work in gladiator combat and gruesome public executions: both forms of horror agitate our mind to maximal degree; they thus generate a powerful self-apperception considered pleasant and beneficiary since it strengthens our will to self-preservation, guarding us from sluggishness, boredom, and—in extreme cases—suicidal predilections. The artful horrors provide such pleasing effects to a lesser degree than the real ones; but they do not pay for these effects with the sort of scruples coming into play, for instance, through the deadly results of the gladiator spectacle. This is, in effect, a hard theory of excitatory appetite: of an abstract hunger for stimuli that embraces, precisely, ugly and horrible phenomena as all the more durable sensations for the receptive sensual and spiritual apparatus. At that theory’s side, we find the more complex theory of *mixed sensations*, developed exclusively to account for the horrors of art. No matter if the latter theory, in its fine and manifold ramifications, is based on a successive or a simultaneous mix of pleasant and unpleasant feelings: in either case, it leads to the paradoxical result that “a mix of pleasure and displeasure . . . is more stimulating than purest enjoyment.”<sup>42</sup> To the extent, namely, that artistic “imitation” must prove its mettle by producing a sense of aesthetic pleasure at “unpleasant objects,” it overcomes resistance and realizes a transformation whose shocks and dangers enhance the stimulatory effect. This theory does not only supply a license for unpleasant objects, but also diagnoses, with great critical acumen, their superiority *vis-à-*

*vis* “pure beauty.” In the first place, horrible objects furnish us with particularly violent stimuli for our perceptive apparatus; in the second place, they furnish us with the joyful relief of these objects being “merely” artful illusion. In contrast, pleasant objects generate only moderate agitation of the passions; and furthermore, awareness of their nonreal nature rather produces disappointment. Correspondingly, Batteux states in his *Les beaux arts réduits en un même principe* (1746):

These effects of imitation, so advantageous for disagreeable objects, turn entirely against agreeable objects for the same reason. The impressions are weakened. . . . Hence, all things otherwise being equal, the heart must be far less happy with agreeable objects in the arts than with those which are disagreeable. Subsequently we find that artists succeed much more easily with the latter than the former.<sup>43</sup>

Or as Mendelssohn put it:

Our fear is seldom stripped of all hope; horror stirs all our capacities to evade the danger; rage is linked with the desire to take revenge, sadness with the pleasant representation of past happiness; and pity cannot be separated from the tender feelings of love and affection. The soul has the freedom of sometimes dallying with the enjoyable aspects of a passion, sometimes with the repugnant, thus according itself a mix of pleasure and displeasure that is more stimulating than purest enjoyment. Little self-attentiveness is required to observe this phenomenon everywhere; for what other reasons would those enraged prefer their rage and angry people prefer their anger to all the joyful images they are offered for the sake of comfort?<sup>44</sup>

The different theories centered on the aesthetic amenities of fear, horror, terror, and pity have been frequently discussed and are sufficiently well known.<sup>45</sup> They were here recapitulated as a pretext, from which *one* single “unpleasant passion” stands apart, as the scandal that *cannot* be incorporated into the field of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>46</sup> Or to repeat the words of J. A. Schlegel: it is “*disgust alone*” that “is excluded from those unpleasant sensations whose nature can be altered through imitation.”

## PLEASURE AND DISPLEASURE

The domain of the aesthetic is hence not regulated by the distinction between beautiful (pleasant) and not-beautiful (unpleasant, ugly, horrible,

sublime, ridiculous, etc.) alone. The beautiful itself is in fact defined as the unity of itself and a not (only) beautiful supplement that first shields it from the sickening satietary value of its own purity; in the framework of this self-contradiction, the beautiful can hardly be considered merely the positive value in a binary “informational” code (beautiful versus ugly). In fact, another aspirant here stakes a stronger claim to being the prime distinction of the aesthetic system: the distinction between (aesthetic) pleasure and displeasure, as traversing and overlaying *both* the phenomenology of the beautiful and the sliding scale of the not-beautiful.<sup>47</sup> This “code” as well, has its logical complications, since pleasure here also figures—indeed, preeminently so—as a mixture of pleasure *and* displeasure. Nevertheless, the lively and enlivening stimulation of an enduring contemplative pleasure is consistently considered as the positive distinctive feature of aesthetic “information”—regardless of the specific definitions, refractions, and mixtures the beautiful *and* the varieties of the unpleasant undergo. A negative proof of the aesthetically distinctive value of the pleasure-displeasure distinction is offered precisely by the fact that, at least in the case of its first theorists, *Eckel* represents both a transcendence of the aesthetic and the transcendence of possible feelings of pleasure:

The soul’s unpleasant passions have yet a third advantage over *Eckel* . . . in that they often flatter the soul even outside the realm of imitation, in nature itself. Their advantage is that they never prompt pure displeasure, rather always mixing their bitterness with delight. . . . The situation is very different, however, in the case of *Eckel* and related sensations. Here the soul does not recognize any perceptible admixture of pleasure.<sup>48</sup>

This binary exclusion from the group of mixed sensations—mixture versus nonmixture of pleasure—testifies less to any timeless insight into the “nature of disgust” as to the architectonic impulse steering Mendelssohn’s differential specification. Long before Freud, later authors will emphasize, precisely, the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion at work in many disgust-eliciting phenomena; in disgust, they will diagnose a repressed or rejected (“fore-closed”) pleasure, rather than the total absence of any relationship with pleasure. Mendelssohn discretely leaves this possibility open by preferring the expression “no *perceptible* admixture of pleasure” to “no admixture of pleasure”—a choice certainly allowing for imperceptible or hidden admixtures. Beforehand, J. A. Schlegel had already defined the relation of pleasure to disgust by means of the dynamic model of an inverse balancing of two scalepans. The “unpleasant sensations” that are conducive to art are marked by a well-balanced alternating rhythm of pleasure and displeasure, with a

light though decisive upperhand granted the feelings of pleasure; by contrast, in the case of disgust, the contribution of pleasure is overwhelmed by the accretion of displeasure:

The most well-rendered depiction of an unclean old woman emphasizing more her repulsive than her ridiculous side will elicit a horror [*Schauer*]<sup>49</sup>—whether or not in painting, I won't dare say, but certainly in poetry—that can be neither balanced off by pleasure at the discovery of similitude nor eradicated by the feeling that it is a fictive sensation. The more imitation succeeds in arriving at the truth—the more accurately and powerfully the disgusting features gain expression—the more violently do they revolt us.

For the dietetics of the beautiful, the paradigm of satietory disgust is more important than all variants of disgust at touching or smelling an object at all; the ties it maintains with pleasure are far more than subcutaneous ones. For satietory disgust emerges at the locus of pleasure itself, where not too little or no pleasure is present, but in fact an excess: it is the trace, then, not of a lack, but of this excess of pleasure. Nevertheless, such a relation between disgust and excessive *Lust* should be distinguished strictly from the archaic-modernistic syndrome of a transgressive disgust-pleasure at excess itself (as in Bataille). This is because the pleasure preceding the experience of satietory disgust actually disappears within it, so that the pleasure is no longer felt *as* pleasure. In Condillac, we find a description of disgust's genesis at the locus of pleasure, in the context of revulsion at specific dishes.<sup>50</sup> For Condillac as for authors of the French Enlightenment in general, culinary judgments of taste are simply an arbitrary, culture-encoded expression of custom. For just this reason, with the onset of an attrition that can affect habit, he sees two paths leading from pleasure to disgust: either the accustomed and desired dainty ("certain fruits") turns directly into a source of *dégoût*, and is thus abandoned; or the road to pleasure's loss takes a detour through disgust from excess. The latter alternative results from the earlier pleasure's "shadowy image" spurring the desires "all the more violently" onward, "to rediscover the earlier relish" through repeated attempts at consumption. What follows an overeating whose "hopes" are repeatedly "disappointed" is a "punishment" which assumes the form of physiological "pain." For its part, this experience of digestive disagreement becomes part of the conception of the habitually desired object, culminating in this fashion likewise in distinct *dégoût*. In the moment of its experience, this disgust, as well, contains no pleasurable admixture; rather, it occupies, by virtue of its own genesis, the locus of a pleasure that has first been weakened by the corrosion of habit, then transformed into its opposite through stubborn and excessive efforts to preserve it or regain it.

## THE “DARKEST OF ALL THE SENSES” AND THE COLLAPSE OF AESTHETIC ILLUSION IN DISGUST

For Mendelssohn, the defeat or exhaustion of aesthetic pleasure is merely one of three features distinguishing the trans-aesthetics of *Eckel*. The first feature is that “properly speaking” “no objects of disgust” exist or can exist in works of art. What is meant to be “excluded” is—always already and a priori—excluded. Why, then, the scandal? Mendelssohn answers with a theory of the dangerous metaphor. Something that “does not have the slightest role in the fine arts” can be “associatively” transferred to them. The stakes involved here are nothing less than an invasion of the “darkest of all the senses”—with a menace of collapse facing prominent features of the aesthetic:

Let us consider how this feeling of disgust naturally emerges. Which senses are most of all subject to its experience? It seems to me these are taste, smell, and touch, the first two from excessive sweetness, the last from an all-too intense tenderness of bodies that do not sufficiently resist the touching fibers. These objects, then, can also become unbearable to the sense of sight through a simple association of concepts, in that we remember the displeasure they prompt for taste, smell, or touch. But, properly speaking, the sense of sight has no objects of disgust. In the end, when lively enough, the mere idea [*blosse Vorstellung*] of disgusting objects can, in itself and for itself, prompt revulsion—and indeed, notably, without the soul needing to imagine [*vorstellen*] the objects as real.

Here, already, we have concrete reasons for *Eckel* being unconditionally excluded from the unpleasant sensations that please in imitation. In the first place, by its very nature, the sensation of *Eckel* can be experienced exclusively by the darkest of all the senses, such as taste, smell, and touch—and these senses do not have the slightest role in the fine arts. Artistic imitation labors solely for the more lucid senses, namely sight and hearing. Sight, however, has no disgusting objects of its own. And as for hearing, perhaps the only feeling of disgust linked to it results from a steady stream of perfect harmonies that would appear to have some similarity with excessive sweetness in regards to taste.<sup>51</sup>

The argument has been often repeated since antiquity: the experience of (artistic) beauty requires distance; paintings, poems, and musical compositions are neither tasted nor smelled nor touched. Even a number of languages acknowledge this distinction: rather than “tasting beautiful” or “smelling beautiful,” they prescribe “tasting good” and “smelling good.” Disgust figures primarily as an experience formed from the senses of contiguity

or proximity: something tastes disgusting (the eighteenth century's standard example: excessive sweetness); something feels disgusting (favorite examples: excessively soft; flabby; pulpy-gluey); something smells disgusting (smell here possessing a wider radius for action than touch or taste, but demanding an as it were physical entrance of the "object" into the sense-organ). What excites disgust must be nearby—indeed this proximity is an essential part of the feeling of disgust. As Aurel Kolnai indicates, it is "not simply the source but also an accompanying object of the feeling of disgust," forming "the bridge between [its] catalyst and the subject-person affected by it"; for this reason, proximity assumes "a key position in the problematic of disgust."<sup>52</sup> Kant himself already put it quite succinctly: the disgusting "presses itself upon us."<sup>53</sup>

Mendelssohn's opposition between senses genuinely capable and incapable of disgust involves an intersection of the sensory feature *proximity versus distance* with that of *obscurity versus lucidity*. In turn, this opposition encapsulates a whole series of additional oppositions: directly material, substantial, and 'real' versus intellectually mediated, form-oriented, more proximate to language, and to this extent tending toward the 'ideal'; resistance to analysis (infinite) openness to analysis; concrete abstract. In view of such features, the distinction between senses capable of and senses removed from disgust sets in play distinctly ambivalent judgments. On the one hand, with the great exception of Herder, eighteenth-century aesthetics aligns the experience of the beautiful with the "distance"-associated senses, considered the superior senses. To be sure, when compared with the accomplishments of the pure intellect, sight and hearing lose in clarity what they gain in sensuality and their accessibility to pleasure. But compared with the "dark" proximity-related senses of "taste, smell, and touch," they indeed stand far closer to the "light" and "clarity" of reason. On the other hand, labeling the senses of proximity as the "dark senses" not only marks a deficit of intelligibility. From a materialist-sensualist perspective, and in the sense of the doctrine of the "dark conceptions" of the soul, that which is distant from reason provides an all the closer contact to the reflectively elusive basis of our physical and spiritual life: as a sensual, a-thetic proof of reality, evidence of an anchoring in the depths of the human soul.<sup>54</sup> Hence what Mendelssohn tends to exclude from the aesthetic can be inscribed soon after into Herder's linkage of beautiful form with the proximity-based sense of touch—this with direct recourse to Mendelssohn's reflections on *Eckel*. Herder thereby endows the relation of the beautiful to disgust with even more complications. Nevertheless, running through the various, disputed assessments of the dark and the more lucid senses is a consistent removal of art from the "actual" disgust-associated senses. Accordingly, Mendelssohn defines *Eckel* as a sensation that "by its very nature . . . can be experienced exclusively by . . . taste and smell . . . and these senses do not have the slightest role in the fine arts."

The consequence involved here is compelling: “properly speaking, the sense of sight has no objects of disgust”—and nor, subsequently, does art. Repeatedly, we find this insight accompanied by the authors noting that “genuine” examples of what needs to be excluded from art are indeed very hard to come by in the existing art works. According to Herder, “nature itself endowed no unpleasant sensation with so narrow a sphere as . . . *Ekel*”; the same sphere is said to be even far narrower within the realm of art. Laying as much stress as he can on the rarity—even the nonexistence—of that disgust destined for exclusion, Herder even coins the phantom-concept of “true *Ekel*.”<sup>55</sup> Measured against its unheard-of rarity, the usual references to disgust are thus (dis)qualified as references to “untrue” simulacra: to inauthentic revenants of an original that can scarcely ever be experienced. Disgust can intrude into the field of art only as such a derivative, an inauthentic “association” or metaphoric transposition—as a figurative memory of itself. What quality predestines this inauthentic derivative, this “distant reminiscence” of “true” disgust,<sup>56</sup> to draw upon it all defensive powers of the aesthetic—indeed, to emerge as *the* tabooed sentiment, *par excellence*?

The answer lies in the configuration of disgust’s first distinctive feature with its second—the feature Mendelssohn himself considered the most important. Put succinctly: the metaphors of disgust (or its figurative derivatives) are so dangerous because they are simultaneously *metonymies* of “the darkest senses.” The figurative derivatives carry with them a “reminiscence” of the dark sensory substrate of the “true” sensation of disgust, thus providing this dark continent entrance into the bright field of art. And these lower senses—or their simulacra—cause the collapse of another key distinction of aesthetic experience: the distinction between nature and art (or “reality” and “artificiality”). It makes no difference to the unfolding of pleasures of taste and smell if that which tastes and smells good is, say, a superb dish or a smell of rose, an artificially prepared or natural material. *Cum grano salis*, the same can be said for the sense of touch. These senses are not accessible to aesthetic illusion because they neglect, and even cause to collapse, the constitutive distinction of aesthetic illusion: the distinction between “nature” and “art” (or “reality” and “artificiality” respectively the “imaginary”). Aesthetic illusion, from rationalist semiotics all the way down to Kant, processes these basic distinctions in a unique manner. Art deceives to the extent that it both suspends and maintains these distinctions. It conceals its own artificiality in favor of the illusory presence of what it represents, and thus appears to be “nature.” Within the rationalistic model, it prompts us to forget the signs it employs, and seems to provide an immediate intuition of the represented object.<sup>57</sup> According to Lessing, even a poet must cause us to “believe” we directly see Helen or Achilles’ shield, in the sense of a transformed rhetoric of producing the effects of real presence (*enargeia*, *hypotyposis*).<sup>58</sup> And although Kant expressly breaks with the rationalistic model of representational transparency, he still offers his



own variant of the time-honored topos *ars est celare artem*: “Nature, we say, was beautiful [*schön*] when it simultaneously looked like art; and art can be called fine art [*schöne Kunst*] only if we are conscious that it is art while it still looks to us like nature.”<sup>59</sup> The lower senses rob all such exchange-grounded models of illusion, which define the formal structure of aesthetic experience, of their underlying premise. For they invest no differential value whatsoever in the poles which are to change sides (i.e., nature and art, or reality and fiction):

Yet I believe there is a far more important difference between disgust and the unpleasant sensations that please in imitation. Representations of fear, sadness, horror, pity, and so forth can only prompt displeasure in so far as we take the evil for reality. Hence they can dissolve into pleasurable sensations with the recognition that they are an artful deception. Due to the law of imagination, the repellent sensation of disgust, however, emerges from an idea in the soul alone, whether or not the [causative] object be held for real. What help, then, could it be for the injured mind [*Gemüt*] when the art of imitation betrays itself, be it even in the most flagrant way? Its displeasure did not result from the assumption that the evil is real, but from the latter’s mere idea, and this is really present. The sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation.<sup>60</sup>

Aesthetic illusion, then, confuses the difference between art and reality, while disgust makes the poles completely collapse. Kant spells out the point with full clarity in his reworking of the triad Mendelssohn constructed out of the physical sensation of disgust, the “mere idea” of something disgusting, and an imagination prevailing without resistance: “For in that strange sensation, resting on nothing but imagination, the artful representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful”<sup>61</sup>—namely, so long as “beautiful” signifies just that complex processing of the same distinction disgust undermines. To rest “on nothing but imagination” here in no way implies a positive assertion of disgust’s irreality or nonexistence. In face of disgust’s power to make collapse the distinction of nature and art, Mendelssohn’s parallel definitions of the sensation as “always nature” and a “mere idea” of imagination rather confirm the *same* suspension of both the indication that something is real and the inverse indication that it is art; the suspension is simply emphasized from the two different poles of the collapsed distinction.

Johann Adolf Schlegel had already noted: “Disgust has the same effects in art as in nature. Against expectations, this is what we learn . . . from experience.”<sup>62</sup> Schlegel can only hold, in a very general manner, the “violent” nature of the disgust-experience responsible for this. Mendelssohn defines this violence more closely as the puncturing, indeed the eradication, of a difference;

in doing so he applies the concept of nature (“always nature”) asymmetrically, as the unity of the *non*-distinction of nature and art, reality and illusion. This hyperreality of disgust suggests an analogy. For Freud, it is the unconscious that operates without an “indicator of reality [*Realitätszeichen*],”<sup>63</sup> steadily preserving an impenetrable obscurity while still constituting the “real” libidinal basis for all behavior. In Freud’s writing and elsewhere, disgust maintains narrow ties with unconscious drives, furnishing their suppression with an (anti)form; it thus marks the fate of the drives in civilization and upbringing. From the vantage of aesthetics, disgust participates in a reality that undoes the very distinction between “real,” on the one hand, “artful deception,” on the other. When it comes to the disgust-sensation, the Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am” can be replaced by a new variant: “I am disgusted, hence something is real.”

The conclusion “the sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation” is only possible through an assumption on Mendelssohn’s part—or the evocation, like Schlegel’s after him, of an “experience”—that is anything but self-evident: “The repellent sensation of *Eckel* . . . emerges from a representation in the soul alone, whether or not the [causative] object be held for real.”<sup>64</sup> It doubtless makes a difference for “representations of fear, sadness, horror, pity, and so forth” if we “take the evil for reality” or only for an “artful deception.” Why should this not be the case for the sensation of disgust as well? Why should precisely this sensation, based in the dark, substance- and reality-bound senses of proximity, know no “indication of reality,” rather being sparked by “mere ideas” of the imagination with the same violence as by a “natural” object, in full indifference to the distinction between imagination and the real? According to Mendelssohn, the relation between disgust and the imagination is clearly subject to a double logic of exclusion and incorporation. On the one hand, the extreme experiential model of disgust belongs to the “darkest of all senses” alone, and is thus strictly separated from imaginative realms mediated by distance and intellect. On the other hand, the imagination allows a re-entry of disgust into its other: in the mode of inauthentic “association” and “reminiscence,” even a “mere idea” of something disgusting activates the structure of indifference to the art-nature difference, thereby imploding the distinction between “reality” and “imitation.” The conditions making *beautiful representation* possible are thus bracketed, if not destroyed.<sup>65</sup> This is the reason why disgust, that dark, substantive, analysis-resistant feeling of reality, is simultaneously such a dangerous metaphor in the field of “higher” and “more lucid” senses. Both the aesthetic and the ideally beautiful classical body are constituted by the exclusion, not only and not so much of “true disgust,” but of the imagined and conceptualized metaphors of disgust. Winckelmann’s—and even Herder’s—beautiful statues, and the tabooed “reminiscence” on disgusting bodies always already distant from art, are products of disassociation: two sides of the same thing, making contact along the boundaries of the aesthetic.<sup>66</sup>

The functional circle of disgust is short and quick. It allows no reflective shock-defense: there are no mediating links between a disgusting stench and the sensation of disgust, and hardly any possibility for conditioning and intervention. True, over large expanses of time, disgust reactions can be either learned or unlearned—they constitute no timeless natural occurrence. But the role of intellectual processing is far less important than with fear, horror, grief, or pity, and the relative distancing is thus far smaller: a further reason why these emotions are fit for “aesthetic” representation, while disgust is not. The absence of longer intellectually reflective sequences in disgust’s regulatory circle is the source of this sensation’s violence. The same absence allows the imagination completely unchecked sway, producing a short circuit between the “real evil” and a “mere idea.” The unimpeded power of *association* has an effect identical to the source itself,<sup>67</sup> while those mixed sensations capable of illusion are subject to another law: the aesthetic-reflective weakening of truly disagreeable phenomena. Here as well, an irreconcilability with the temporality of reflection reveals itself as the decisive aesthetic defect of disgust. Being a violent response to an intrusion into our organs, the sensation simply leaves no room for reflection. It is a decisive and thoroughly finite reaction, while ever since 1750, aesthetic experience is meant to unveil reflective indeterminacy and infinity.

Pursuing its way from disgust’s first distinctive feature to the second, Mendelssohn’s theory thus traverses a field of considerable conceptual tensions. Regarding the first feature, he states that “properly speaking . . . no objects of disgust” exist for the aesthetic senses—only transpositions, memories, derivatives. Yet because of their non-intelligibility, their ties to the “dark” proximity-based senses, these distant simulacra are sufficiently powerful—according to the second feature—to make the reflective scaffold of aesthetic experience collapse (i.e., the configurative structure comprising suspension, exchange, and the maintenance of the “nature”-“art” distinction). In addition, the hyperfactual sense of reality, as experienced in disgust, provides another possibility for juxtaposing the mere opposition between the beautiful and the disgusting with a tendency toward convergence of these opposites. The beautiful is meant to deceive. Through its status as artificial sign, it is meant to engender the illusion of a real presence of something absent. The more deceptive, the more natural and real the effect of the beautiful representation. For its part, even as a “mere idea” of imagination, the disgusting “always” realizes this effect of nature. Hence the disgusting at the same time marks that value in which the beautiful’s illusion-ideal is fulfilled with security and without strain, that is, “always.” But precisely for this reason, it ceases to be a distinguishing accomplishment of artistic representation.

From this vantage, the “disgust”-cipher simply signifies the deception realized by the beautiful itself: a deception that operates irrespective of all differences, thus negating itself.<sup>68</sup> Like the unmixedly beautiful, when left

entirely to its own devices, culminates in “pure sweetness,” so, too, the successful aesthetic illusion of real presence undergoes an immanent shift into the disgusting: namely, when the illusion becomes absolute, and is no longer punctured by an accompanying awareness of its illusory character (i.e., by a residual noting of art’s difference from “reality”). Mendelssohn diagnosed such an immanent shift of successful illusion into *Ekel* as occurring, in particular, when sculpture is painted: “I believe that when painted by the greatest artists, the most beautiful statues could not be contemplated without disgust.” Ordinarily, the illusion of “nature” is evidence of beautiful representation; to the extent, however, that nothing recalls the artificiality of the representation, the law of art’s success turns into a law of its disgusting failure: “painted statues are all the more unpleasant the closer they come to nature. . . . Life-size representations in wax, dressed in real clothes, evoke a highly repulsive impression.”<sup>69</sup> Or as Hegel put it: “There are portraits that, as witty minds have rightly observed, are resemblant to the point of being disgusting.”<sup>70</sup> This provides yet a further reason for the claim that the disgusting is not only beauty’s maximal oppositional value, but rather is nondifferentiated beauty itself. It is pure sweetness, or the absolutely successful illusion of “nature” and real presence—an absolutely successful illusion that simultaneously ceases to be an illusion, since by causing oppositions to collapse, it erases every artistic difference as well as every distinctive “indication of reality.”

Already in 1745, Johann Elias Schlegel—a brother of *Ekel*-theorist J. A. Schlegel—offered an advance variant on the thesis of a hyperreal reality even adhering to artificial *Ekel*:

There are also sensations in which it actually cannot be taken for granted that an idea in imagination would be less powerful than a sensual perception of the very same thing. For at times, representation within the imagination feels as if a thing is being all the more accurately dissected, whereas one would turn one’s eyes away if this thing were seen from the outside. It seems to me disgust belongs to this category. It is awakened far less by the view of a disgusting thing than by an accomplished narration. And I admit that I much prefer seeing a truly ugly old woman to reading a very detailed description of her.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the sequence of other unpleasant sensations, whose artful “representations . . . could never be as strong” as the “passion itself,” in disgust, the difference in strength between real and artful source is here not only leveled, but even inverted. With disgust thus assigned the role of a pure “representation within the imagination,” Schlegel’s inversion disfigures a palliative against disgust, inscribed in disgust-theory itself, to the point of recognition. Through sleight of hand, disgust emerges as “an accomplished

narration," a "view," a "very detailed description"—as everything that by definition, Herder's "true *Ekel*" is not. The theory of disgust's exclusion thus itself realizes what it propagates: disgust is, "properly speaking," excluded from the arts, from the very beginning (first exclusion); even the distant reminiscences on disgust must be excluded all the more tenaciously (second exclusion); at the same time, such derivatives and transpositions are transformed, entirely, into effects of what stands opposed, as theoretical and aesthetic modes, to physical-substantive disgust—into effects, that is, of imagination and representation (third exclusion). And nonetheless: the theory conveys more than it states. For Schlegel, "a truly ugly old woman" stands in once more for the unstated.

### SEMANTICIZED AND "CRUDE" DISGUST

In the 83rd of his *Letters regarding Literature*, Mendelssohn returns to the previous letter's theory of disgust, now strengthening his rigorous rules of exclusion with an additional observation:

Let us take note of the following difference between *Eckel* and the highest degree of the horrible. The former does not only cause displeasure on the stage, but also in descriptions and poetic portrayals, and can never serve as a source of the sublime. But however much the poet increases the horrible's intensity, he will continue to earn our praise, as the more violently he makes us shudder, the more sublime his work.<sup>72</sup>

If there is any theoretical-doctrinal "progress" from Mendelssohn to Lessing, it lies less in the technical refutation of this thesis as in its subversive application. For Mendelssohn, the horrible belongs to "the unpleasant sensations that please in imitation," since it can serve as a "source of the sublime." Disgust is blocked from this path of aesthetic ennoblement qua mixing. For Lessing, there is, however, a detour: namely, a *double* application of the mixing operation. The disgusting need only become an "ingredient"<sup>73</sup> of the horrible or monstrous in order to serve, with them and like them, as a "source of the sublime" or other aesthetic pleasure.<sup>74</sup> It can equally take on a functional role in the domain of the comic and ridiculous, being even coopted there to promote the joy of laughter:

The drollest features of this sort are contained in the Hottentot tale "Tquassouw and Knonmquaiha," in the *Connoisseur*, an English weekly magazine, full of humor, which is ascribed to Lord Chesterfield. We know how dirty the Hottentots are and how many things

that awaken disgust and loathing in us are beautiful, comely, and sacred to them. A piece of flattened cartilage for a nose, flabby breasts hanging down to the navel, the whole body covered with a layer of goat's fat and soot and tanned by the sun, the hair dripping with grease, feet and arms entwined with fresh entrails—think of all this present in the object of a fiery, worshipping, tender love; hear this expressed in the noble language of sincerity and admiration, and try to keep from laughing.<sup>75</sup>

Is, then, the disgusting—the transcendence of the aesthetic, and of any mix with pleasure—indeed usable as part of, and medium for, aesthetic pleasure in representation? The answer is affirmative, to the extent that Lessing can in fact draw on an imposing sequence of disgusting details to be found in numerous literary masterpieces—among these, by Aristophanes, Ovid, and Dante. Johann Georg Sulzer thus begins his article on *Ekel* in his *General Theory of the Fine Arts* (1773–1775) with the following remark:

Some of our judges of art have made it a basic maxim of the fine arts that nothing disgusting should be represented in an artwork. But a closer consideration of the matter shows this prohibition to be not only ungrounded, but also trespassed by the greatest masters of art.<sup>76</sup>

In any event, Sulzer's argument falls short of properly restating the "basic maxim" he is dismissing with regard to aesthetic theory's foundational treatises. Disgust, for Sulzer, is not allowed for its own sake and as a moment of aesthetic pleasure, but only for didactic purpose: "to keep people away from evil through displeasure and repugnance." Lessing's model—disgust's entry into the field of "pleasing" representations through double subordination—is certainly incomparably more elegant; but it demands from disgust a similar self-annihilation through functionalization. Disgust now becomes a purveyor of meaning; it forms part of a symbolics of the ridiculous: as a signifying vehicle of mockery, whose substantive, physical weight—put emphatically, its being—is bracketed by the comical intention at work in it. As Lessing himself concedes, such a disgust, tamed by a signifying intention, is something altogether different from that nonsemanticized "bare" disgust,<sup>77</sup> which is subject to the taboo of exclusion. This distinction allows Lessing to license the disgusting in art while simultaneously maintaining the taboo placed on it—simply with somewhat less rigid borders. If art "does not favor the disgusting for its own sake," but to "thereby intensify the ridiculous and horrible," the imperative of its avoidance comes promptly into play as soon as anything disgusting "appears before us in its own crude form,"<sup>78</sup> free of this intensifying function. Lessing even conjures up the danger that with a second look, successfully blended disgust might once more become "entirely separate"—in

other words, that from subdued and licensed, significatory disgust, “crude,” unadulterated disgust might reappear.<sup>79</sup> His example is one of the standard references to be found in the contemporary tracts on *Ekel*.

I come now to disgusting objects in painting. Even if it were an indisputable fact that there is actually no such thing as an object disgusting to the sight—an object which painting as a fine art would naturally renounce—disgusting objects would still have to be avoided, because the association of ideas renders them disgusting to the sight as well. In a painting of the burial of Christ, Pordenone pictures one of the bystanders holding his nose. Richardson objects to this on the ground that Christ has not been dead long enough for his body to have begun to putrefy. But in the case of the resurrection of Lazarus, he believes that the painter might be allowed to depict some of the bystanders in such an attitude, as the story expressly states that his body had already begun to smell. To my mind, such a representation would also be unthinkable, since it is not only actual stench that awakens a feeling of disgust, but even its very idea. We avoid places that stink, even when we have a cold. But painting, it may be objected, does not favor the disgusting for its own sake; just as is true of poetry, it needs it to intensify the ridiculous and the terrible. At its own peril! But what I have said about the ugly in this respect applies all the more to the disgusting. It loses incomparably less of its effect in an imitation meant for the eye than in one meant for the ear. Consequently, it will blend less closely with elements of the ridiculous and terrible in the former than in the latter case, for as soon as our surprise is over and our first eager look satisfied, the disgusting becomes a separate thing again, appearing before us in its own crude form.<sup>80</sup>

Mendelssohn’s central theorem of disgust from a “mere idea” is here conveyed through an impressive example: even the “very idea” of stench awakens disgust. Lessing’s incorporation of that “dark sense” into art thus culminates in a renewed exteriorization.<sup>81</sup> The same can be said for Herder’s analogous effort to create a limited license for disgust by modifying Winckelmann’s distinction between main and secondary work. As Winckelmann explains it, in an “accessory or *parergon*,” “deficiencies in form and workmanship” must occasionally be tolerated, so long as in the main work “here the author, there the poet, have displayed their utmost skill.”<sup>82</sup> Herder displaces this “lenient judgment” concerning “sloppiness”<sup>83</sup> in the direction of a supplementation of the beautiful by the not (only) beautiful: a supplementation not only tolerable to the beautiful, but that serves it and is even required by it. In light, Herder claims, of the many “repulsive figures” to be found in all mythologies

and religions, even the Olympian, “much paper crammed with protests would have been spared by recognizing that in a composition comprised of various figures, a secondary figure cannot be subject to the rule of shaping that governs the main figure without the entire composition being ruined.”<sup>84</sup> If the same mimetic rule aimed at beauty were applied everywhere, the result would be “a dull *one and the same* of long-limbed, straight-nosed, so-called Greek figures standing in line on parade.”<sup>85</sup>

Herder’s vision of uniformly beautiful runway-models evokes the disgust-value of oversatiation, hence the desire for variation—for ugly or repulsive antidotes. And yet, beyond such a contrastive, preserving and strengthening function for the beautiful, Herder himself leaves the decree of banishment aimed at disgust intact:

Concerning Hesiod’s depiction of sadness my feelings and those of Longinus are the same—be it for whatever reasons, I do not wish to see the running nose: I do not wish to see anything that awakens real disgust. Disgust as such simply cannot be mingled with other, pleasing, feelings.<sup>86</sup>

With this, the circle closes—albeit now expanded by an interior differentiation. “Disgust” is not only the direct antipole and, simultaneously, the inherent satietory value of the beautiful. Besides demarcating the extreme (counter)values of the aesthetic, it can be found at its very center: as a functional admixture of the other affects or as a necessary contrastive value (*parergon*) of the “principle rule.” It thus tends to be found virtually everywhere and always: a multiple, ghostly quantity, a *shifter* taking on other values without a pause—and yet, or just for that reason, remaining oddly nonexistent. “Properly speaking,” disgust is entirely absent from the aesthetic senses of sight and hearing, thus not having “the slightest role in the fine arts”—while nevertheless requiring exclusion with all apotropaic exertion. Where it is nonetheless admitted, it consistently turns out, despite deceptive phenomenal similitude, a harmless, domesticated doppelgänger of the “crude,” “actual,” and “true” original. As the aesthetic’s entirely other, it remains basically unrepresentable, invisible, unidentifiable for the field that it limits: an empty cipher for that which the world of beautiful forms cannot appropriate or integrate. As soon as this absolute transcendence reifies itself into anything identifiably disgusting and, as such, appears *within* the aesthetic domain, it ceases to be what it (non)conceptually is, its monstrous alterity thus being reduced to the level of an inner-aesthetic phenomenon. Hence the difficulty of finding any fully convincing examples in works of art for transgression of the disgust-taboo: despite all authorial consensus to the contrary, even the runny nose that is nothing but a runny nose is not destined beyond all doubt to spark disgust. Inherently, every example is already, qua example or identifiable appearance in



the domain of the aesthetic, a depotentiation of plainly heterogeneous *disgust* to a representable quantity of the *disgusting*.<sup>87</sup> And yet: regardless of all depotentiation and second order simulation, the phantom, the transcendental signifier “real disgust” remains intact. For still as a phantom, it serves to found that very identity of the aesthetic whose absolute transcendence it is supposed to be. Symbolically excluded, imaginarily plagued by the fury of vanishment, yet omnipresent, disgust marks the position of a tabooed reality: one that never stops returning to the field of the aesthetic, in order once again to be ejected. It is the beautiful’s matter, matrix, *Marter* (the German word for plague or torment)—indeed even its disgusting old lady or banished *mater*. Everywhere, the articulation of the beautiful human body, the ideal of the “classical” authors, bears the traces of its emergence from this phantasmagoric body of disgust.