REVIEW ARTICLE

IMAGINING DISGUST¹

Nat Hardy Savannah State University 423

Robert Wilson's *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust* is a compelling work that charts the flyblown landscape of disgust in a variety of artistic mediums ranging from literature, film, personal experience and the powers of imagination. Part literary critic, part ethnographer, Wilson wears a medley of intellectual mortar boards ranging from humanist to anthropologist, from psychoanalyst to cultural historian, and from moral philosopher to confessor. Although Wilson vehemently maintains that his book is an argument rather than an encyclopedia of disgust, the research is rigorously encyclopedic in scope with its wealth of detailed analyses and exhaustive examples (though reader be warned: not all are entirely suitable for the weak stomached). Indeed, *The Hydra's Tale* takes readers into a festering and often malodorous domain where some will very likely be resistant to tread. Whether it be a mucoid puddle, a slithering bowl of vomit, some untrammeled incontinence, or just a miasmal cloud of rot and stench, disgust beckons at nearly every narrative turn.

In taking on an unsettling and divergent subject such as disgust, however, Wilson sets himself a rather monumental task because, as he points out: "In one of its most powerful senses, disgust names that which cannot be represented or which lies beneath the possibilities of representation." By descending into a tabooed and repressed domain of experience that most people resist or willingly repress, Wilson

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée CRCL DECEMBER 2007 DÉCEMBRE RCLC 0319-051X/07/34.4/423©CANADIAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

peels back the purulent skin of revulsion by providing a comprehensive reexamination of the rancid grandeur of disgust² where the concept is limited only by one's grotesque imagination.

As readers wade through the muck and mess of his graphic examples, Wilson affords his audience timely occasions to reflect and come up for some still pungent air. Despite its often-unpalatable subject matter (ranging from coprophagy to necrophilia, smegma to toe jam and from violent vomiting to sudden incontinence), even a book such as *The Hydra's Tale* is not itself disgusting because, as Wilson reminds us, "The representation of filth is not filth." Indeed, Wilson's varied and, daresay; even seductive representations of filth are compelling as they might be revolting.

As much as disgust can be an instinctual response to noisome or visually graphic offending stimuli, disgust is also a relative experience dictated by one's own cultural standards and conditioning. "Disgust," as Wilson pointedly argues, "is both physical and moral, concrete and metaphorical, can also be a matter of stimulation, of pretense and make-believe." Whether physical or imaginary, the disgust experience can be a fluid and transitory encounter, largely dependent on one's instinctual or moral barometer, not to mention the cultural tastes of the time. For example, what might have offended or disgusted a previous generation might now be tolerated or accepted. Indeed, as Wilson suggests: "each generation discovers new disgusting objects and acts." The mainstream media provides an ideal case in point for comprehending moral disgust. Given the Janet Jackson scandal during the half-time Super Bowl show a few years ago, the American media is increasingly criticized by many conservatives as a foul hydra in its own right. In the age of reality shows, the Playboy Channel, COPS, MTV and Howard Stern, many moralists deem such shows "disgusting" and "in poor taste." As Wilson reiterates, however, just as "New objects of disgust appear ... old ones vanish or are displaced into ordinariness. Every revolution, even a small one, transforms values." In time then, Jackson's titillating "wardrobe malfunction" might very well incite its own revolution, though perhaps not until the lawsuits have ceased and the moral disgust has settled within the collective gorge of the righteous.

Though profoundly philosophical and, at times, intensely introspective, Wilson's engaging text invites even the most timid readers into the nasty, brutish and wretched psycho-visceral depths of disgust. Perhaps what is most intriguing about this book is Wilson's own intellectual obsession with disgust. Wilson's passion for his subject is boldly infectious as it challenges our own capacities for disgust. Throughout the book, Wilson exposes his readers to psychic phenomenon of disgust is all of its most nauseating stinks, textures and hues. And as repulsed we might be with his often fulsome examples, Wilson's study is an intriguing read that traverses an oozing array of these so-called "disgust-worlds" in graphic detail.

As Wilson occasionally takes some playful liberties with his subject matter, in doing so, the author exudes a delightful Rabelaisian flair for his themes in a style that is personal, witty and artfully en*gross*ing. This is a book that deliberately resists euphemism and decorum "to make the topic as graphic as possible and to engage the

imagination (disgust's primary residence) vividly." As Wilson puts it, disgust "pollutes the bright froth of human existence like a small maggot-slithering turd within a saucer of champagne." Indeed, the prose style of *The Hydra's Tale*, as this sample suggests, is both piquant and lucid, particularly for a theoretically focused study.

Particularly striking are several of Wilson's chapter introductions where the author offers his own poignant interactions with disgust. In what he describes as part "ficto-theory," part "bio-fiction," Wilson "distill[s] conceptual analysis out of personal experience." Wilson's book traverses the globe with "ugly moment" anecdotes from Paris, neophyte water sports in San Francisco³, a motorcycle accident in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah, riding a train with an obsessive Sports Bore, barroom brawls in Chicago, a self-abusing intellectual who suffers from sexual trauma, the rancid stench of a handsome though unhygienic male on the Australian south coast. The brutal honesty of these personal encounters make intrepid and fitting segues into each of the chapters.

Structurally, Wilson's mythological Hydra provides an ideal metaphor for a study that anatomizes the unsettling phenomena of disgust. As each chapter dissects the hydra from its spoor, its stench, its lair, its body, its many eyes, its heads and its venom, the variegated forms of disgust are ultimately dissembled and critically digested or as Wilson might even suggest, theoretically regurgitated. But where *The Hydra's Tale* makes its scholarly impact most impressive is in Wilson's reexamination of theories of disgust. With this book, Wilson joins the ranks of other great minds that dissect the disgust experience. Given the current theoretical interest into disgust, Wilson brings an alternative perspective to the debate. Taking his lead from earlier works by Kelly Anspaugh, Bruce Boehrer, Alain Corbin, Jonathan Hart, Julia Kristeva, Annick Le Guérer, William Miller, Martin Pops and Alton Robertson, Wilson constructs a candid paradigm for understanding this complex phenomena. In this comprehensive analysis and reexamination of disgust theories, Wilson ultimately fashions his own intriguing web of paradigms.

Methodologically, Wilson's research transcends more recent works in disgust, particularly William Ian Miller's *Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), a much-lauded book, considering, as Wilson points out, Miller's study ignores art, film and literature. One of the greatest strengths of the study is Wilson's vast knowledge of film and literature. Wilson's critical analyses of these art forms are both accurate and sharply clever. Unlike Miller, *The Hydra's Tale* examines disgust motifs in horror and terror fiction such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Wilson's commentary and analyses of films such as Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* and Luis Buneul's *Chien Andalou*, David Cronenberg's *The Brood*, David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and the *Alien* series, to name but a few, provide an ideal overview of cinematic disgust.

What radically separates Wilson's studies from Miller's and other works on disgust is that contemporary scholars claim that the experience is more fixed and constant, as if contacts with disgust were a uniform, even universal experience for all sub425

jects. While Wilson notes that contemporary theories of disgust cannot be ignored, his book challenges current theories by arguing that they are "radically uncooperative" and rather erroneously grounded on dated concepts of constancy and fixedness. Indeed, as Wilson argues, disgust is far more complex than that. If anything, objects and acts of disgust are "both various and variable, shape shifting and Protean to an extreme degree." Within Wilson's formative framework then, one must examine the culture at large for a greater critical understanding of disgust. "Disgust in literature," as Wilson rightly reminds us, "is often highly symbolic; no longer visceral, it takes on the resinous, clotted flesh of metaphor." Indeed, Wilson's text speaks artfully for itself.

In the first chapter, Wilson examines five different theoretical models that have been used to explain disgust: the moral-legal model (from William Ian Miller and John Kekes), the social constructionist model (from Thomas Scheff, April Fallon, Paul Rozin, and William Ian Miller), the psychoanalytic model (from Freud's disgust **426** formation), the slime or viscous model (from Jean-Paul Sartre and Mary Douglas), and the transgressive model (from Georges Bataille). Having expounded upon the five models and their assumptive limitations, Wilson correctly concludes, "no single model fully explains disgust." Unlike his own "Hydra" metaphor, these other paradigms fail to see, as Wilson argues, fail to "see disgust's many headedness." In this sense, Wilson argues, unlike many other theorists, that a disgust response is less universal and more relativistic, it is a reaction rising out of a variety of factors dependent upon psychological development, social conditioning and cultural codes. In this sense, Wilson argues that disgust is "highly metamorphic" in that aversion transforms as our cultural conditions change. The bottom line is that we are ultimately products or dare say, victims of cultural training, thus, our responses to disgust will be relative according to our own social conditioning. To complicate matters further, our disgust responses continue to evolve as our moral tastes change.

As Wilson concludes, disgust is "never stable, never irrevocably fixed and certain." Unlike the more simplistic models of his contemporaries then, *The Hydra's Tale* fleshes out a much more complex theory of disgust within its seven chapters, offering a more universalizing view of disgust and, and more poignantly, how disgust plays out in the imagination. Wilson's theoretical taxonomy of disgust is not, as Wilson some exercise in "gonzo cultural theory," but rather a complex methodology that isolates the phenomena of disgust into separate and telling categories. Within these categories, *The Hydra's Tale* addresses the physical, the moral and the paradoxical power of disgust because as repulsed as we humans might be with disgusting acts, objects or experiences, we are sometimes drawn rather perversely towards them. As Wilson's text explains in detail, disgust is a complex phenomenon, a reaction much more than mere "violent gagging and nausea," disgust is equally, as Wilson convincingly argues, "the imagination of physical rot."

The Hydra's Tale is an important and pivotal study that surpasses contemporary theories of disgust by nature of its more inclusive and comprehensive model. Unlike

many other researchers, Wilson's methodology addresses *all* possible aspects of the cultural spectrum with a uniquely distinct emphasis on the powers of imagination. With scholarly candor and hardened honesty, *The Hydra's Tale* elucidates the abundant powers of disgust, which, as Wilson contends, "centre on upon the body, but flower in the mind."

Whether one is charmed or repulsed by disgust, Wilson offers his readers unflinching and even visionary insights into the phenomenon. From Shakespeare to shock art and from filth to film, Wilson dissects the cultural impact of disgust in impressive detail. The elaborate footnotes are another welcome supplement to the book and are as elaborate as they are entertaining. *The Hydra's Tale* is a masterwork study—a tour de force exploration weaved together in a candid, sharp and absorbing narrative—a delight to read.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Review article on Robert Rawdon Wilson. The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2002. ISBN#0-88864-368-3.
- 2 One of Wilson's more poignant anecdotes conveys his own experience with disgust in as dignified manner as possible:
 - Once in the remote bush of Western Australia, I found the ground meat that I had intended to cook for dinner already fly-blown. It slithered with maggots, all performing their little humping crawl beneath the plastic covering. In a spasm of loathing, I threw the contaminated bundle into the rubbish, scurrying to wash my hands as quickly as I could. However, an experienced bushman rescued the package and showed me how to cook the meat using a long-handled frying pan over an open fire. By keeping one side of the skillet relatively cool, slanted downwards and hanging out over the fire, he tricked the maggots, desperate to continue their minimal existence, into crawling out of the meat onto the cool side. He then dumped them into the fire and presto! the meat was ready to eat, savoury if not entirely appetizing. (A bit later, I learned that many bushmen would simply cook up the maggots in flyblown meat, devouring the ugly dish without qualms as just "protein.") (xii-xiii)
- Of all of Wilson's own personal encounters with disgust the graphic honesty of his urolagnia experience in San Francisco is bold and compelling: "I had heard of golden showers, but I has [sic] never quite believed in them. It was rather like the very different, but semiotically linked, act of eating excrement: I had heard about it, but it was totally outside my immediate experience. I had not yet explored the interrelationship between sex and disgust. "Piss on me," Georgie murmured huskily from the tub. I gaped and felt queasy. I said stupid things like "You don't really want me to, do you?" or "You won't like that, I better not." But Georgie knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted a man to urinate upon her. She insisted. And the situation, afterwards graphically incised upon my memory, seemed to demand that I do just that ... I moved the direction of the stream up to her bellybutton, her breasts and along her neck and shoulders. I could not bring myself to urinate upon her face. As my urine slowed, I brought the stream, now an exhausted dribble, back down to her vagina, the final drops falling upon her knees and feet. Georgie seemed very happy" (87).

427