afterword: on disgust

Theories, poetics, and ethics of “desire” abound, but something about disgust seems to have resisted engendering these forms of attention.1 Though Barthes’s *jouissance*—the hyperbolic endpoint of desire, if not a form of desire per se—and all of its variants have energized critical writing on literature for decades, disgust has no keywords associated with it and has largely remained outside the range of any organized critical practice or school. Even the theory of abjection at the heart of Julie Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, a theory initially formulated in a scene of “loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung,” is eventually reconceptualized in the libidinal terms of “want,” “primal repression,” and self-shattering *jouissance*; in fact, Kristeva argues, “*jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such.”2 To be sure, from the depiction of Marcel’s first encounter with Gilberte in Proust’s *Swann’s Way* (“I thought her so beautiful that I should have liked to be able to retrace my steps so as to shake my fist at her and shout, ‘I think you are hideous, grotesque; how I loathe you!’”) to the films of John Waters, artists as well as philosophers have demonstrated that desire and
disgust are dialectically conjoined. As William Miller notes, "the disgusting itself has the power to allure," particularly as an object created by social taboos and prohibitions. The allure is not even solely a matter of repression, for "fascination with the disgusting is something we are often quite conscious of even as we turn away" (Miller, *AD*, 110). Yet the striking asymmetry between the careers of disgust and desire in literary and cultural theory raises the broader question of why repulsion has such a long history of being overshadowed by attraction as a theoretical concern, even as we can plausibly assert that the late capitalist lifeworld is one in which there are at least as many things to turn away from—the strong centripetal pull of consumer culture notwithstanding—as things to be drawn toward.

This turning away is arguably the most polemical as well as the most passive gesture of the copyist in "Bartleby," who disturbs also in his closely related refusal to consume anything. Conversely, the principle of "charity," which we have seen Melville interrogate extensively in *The Confidence-Man*, is not only breezily acknowledged by the Lawyer as a practical attitude founded on "self-interest," but summoned in high professional-managerial fashion as an affective prophylactic against the repugnance he seems noticeably reluctant to admit that Bartleby produces—a repugnance which of course includes a great deal of fascination. Significantly, in keeping with his convivial "Wall-Street spirit" (and with no small amount of self-congratulation), it is the prudent suppression of his aversion that enables the Lawyer to tolerate his employee's discomforting presence. For what seems intolerable about Bartleby is how paradoxically visible he makes his social invisibility, even from behind the screen that literally conceals him from view, thwarting what Erving Goffman calls the "civil inattention" on which the routines of public life in an affluent democracy depend. If the disgusting is always that which is insistent and intolerable, Melville suggests that tolerance is always, in some fundamental way, a negation of disgust. Benevolent tolerance is in fact presented in this story as a
barely disguised euphemism for a pity that at times seems to verge on contempt: "I strove to drown my exasperated feelings toward the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct. Poor fellow, poor fellow! thought I, he don't mean anything; and besides, he has seen hard times, and ought to be indulged." Is Bartleby aware that the Lawyer secretly finds him repulsive? More interestingly, is he making use of the Lawyer's attempt to manage this repulsion, mobilizing "charity" to downgrade his unproductive disgust to the more socially acceptable, friendly contempt one has for someone perceived as inferior but basically harmless—that is, a person who "don't mean anything"?

It thus seems fitting to close this book with a few remarks on some implications of the asymmetrical fates, in late twentieth-century literary theory, of "desire" and this ugly feeling par excellence, which Kant highlights in the Critique of Judgement as the single exception to representational art's otherwise unlimited power to beautify things which are ugly or displeasing in real life, such as "The Furies, diseases, [and] the devastations of war." As Kant notes, "There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites disgust. For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful" (CJ, 155). As a negation of beauty that anticipates the modernist avant-garde's critical assault on art's identification with beauty, there is a sense in which the disgusting is "the true Kantian sublime"—more sublime than the sublime itself, or, as Derrida suggests, the absolute "other" of the system of taste. This is implicit in Kant's comment, in his earlier work Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sub-
lime, that “nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust.”¹⁰ In the Critique of Judgement, what makes the object abhorrent is precisely its outrageous claim for desirability. The disgusting seems to say, “You want me,” imposing itself on the subject as something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed. The split between disgust and desire thus seems paradoxically internal to Kantian disgust. Disgust both includes and attacks the very opposition between itself and desire, and, in doing so, destroys not only “aesthetic satisfaction” but the disinterestedness on which it depends.

Yet there is always a certain asymmetry in the pairing of disgust and desire, since disgust is a structured and agonistic emotion carrying a strong and unmistakable signal, while desire is often noisy and amorphous. Like animatedness, desire almost seems pre- or sub-affective. There is thus a sense in which disgust is the ugliest of “ugly feelings,” yet an interesting exception. For disgust is never ambivalent about its object. More specifically, it is never prone to producing the confusions between subject and object that are integral to most of the feelings discussed in this book. Whereas the obscuring of the subjective-objective boundary becomes internal to the nature of feelings like animatedness and paranoia, disgust strengthens and polices this boundary. Even if disgust is boiled down to its kernel of repulsion, repulsion itself tends to be a fairly definite response, whereas the parameters of attraction are notoriously difficult to determine and fix. Put simply, desire seems capable of being vague, amorphous, and even idiosyncratic in ways that disgust cannot. Moreover, as Miller notes, “the avowal of disgust expects concurrence” (AD, 194), whereas we tend not to ask for supplementary ratification of our desired object’s desirability, or demand that others share our affective relation to it or our valuation of it, once that object has actually been established.¹¹

Hence, while disgust explicitly blocks the path of sympathy in Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiment, and is closely linked to his “unsocial” passions of resentment and hatred, there is a sense in
which it seeks to include or draw others into its exclusion of its object, enabling a strange kind of sociability. Disgust’s “expectation of concurrence” also distinguishes it from a particular kind of contempt characterized predominantly by indifference, as brought out most clearly in its definition by Hobbes: “Those things which we neither desire, nor hate, we are said to contempt: CONTEMPT being nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy [obstinacy] of the heart, in resisting the action of certain things.” The indifference of Hobbesian contempt (which, as Miller notes, looks more like “the contempt of complacency, of never doubting your superiority or rank,” than like the contempt we associate with active dislike; *AD*, 215) surprisingly draws it closer to the very antithesis of disgust—tolerance—than to the aversive emotion it would seem much more to resemble. For unlike the disgusting, which is perceived as dangerous and contaminating and thus something to which one cannot possibly remain indifferent, the object of Hobbesian contempt, like that of its close relations, pity and disdain, is relatively harmless. Too weak or insignificant to pose any sort of danger, the object of contempt is perceived as inferior in a manner that allows it to be dismissed or ignored. Hence, contempt is part of the nexus of affects, in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, that distinguishes the morality of the happy and self-secure “noble man” from the morality of the “slave.” As Nietzsche writes, “There is indeed too much carelessness, too much taking lightly, too much looking away and impatience involved in contempt, even too much joyfulness, for it to be able to transform its object into a real ... monster.” One could say that the object is perceived as inferior in a manner that permits it to be tolerated (if only barely). Contempt might be described as the negative boundary of the affective spectrum of tolerance, which includes affable versions as well. This is not to say that tolerance and contempt are the same thing, only that contemptuous tolerance is possible in a way that disgusted tolerance is not. If desire says “Yes” and disgust says “No,” the contempt described by Nietzsche and Hobbes says, “Whatever.” Disgust
finds its object intolerable and demands its exclusion, while the objects of contempt "simply do not merit strong affect; they are noticed only sufficiently so as to know that they are not noticeworthy" (Miller, AD, 215). As Miller also notes, "One can condescend to treat them decently, one may, in rare circumstances, even pity them, but they are mostly invisible or utterly and safely disattendable" (AD, 215, italics added). This disattendability is the principle which Bartleby conspicuously and even stuplimely violates by adhering to it too well; in not eating, not striving, nor seeming to desire anything, Bartleby even seems to take himself as disattendable. Indeed, the aversion that Bartleby elicits from the Lawyer, which the Lawyer is then compelled to manage with the affects of conviviality and charity, involves a disattendability so exaggerated that the disattendability itself comes to demand attention. We might say that for all his passivity, Bartleby is finding a way to make to make himself intolerable: someone who can no longer properly fit into the slot of the object of Hobbesian contempt, and precisely by embodying the immobility that defines it. The unsettling proximity between Hobbesian contempt and the more benign notion of tolerance—disclosed precisely through the managerial suppression of disgust in Melville’s story—is a topic to which we will shortly return.

Disgust is urgent and specific; desire can be ambivalent and vague. The former expects concurrence; the latter does not. I should clarify that in what follows, the word “desire” refers not to sexuality or sexual practices, or to psychoanalysis’ highly exciting concept of drive or libido, but rather to the vaguely affective idiom broadly used as an “index of [literary] heterogeneity” by late twentieth-century literary theorists across methods and affiliations. That is, I mean the “desire” associated with images of fluidity, slippage, and semantic multiplicity—what Kristeva in Desire in Language (111) calls polynomia or “the pluralization of meaning by different means (polyglottism, polysemy, etc.)”—which has become technical shorthand for virtually any perceived transgres-
sion of the symbolic status quo. Inclusive, pluralistic, and often eclectic, literary theory’s “desire” is admittedly appealing, especially when positioned as “a mobile system of free signifying devices” in explicit contrast to the rigid hierarchies of the symbolic order (Kristeva, DL, 116). Its very attractiveness suggests that an explanation for the divergent fates of attraction and repulsion in critical discourse is not hard to seek; in fact, we do not have to begin in this narrowly circumscribed arena to do so. For in a consumer society in which the public sphere has become increasingly coextensive with the marketplace, the spectrum of desires is simply broader than that of disgust, offering a rich multiplicity of ways to define and express all sorts of attraction. At the same time, the language of repulsion is much more narrow and restricted, such that we tend to find a rhetoric of disgust supplanted by weaker but categorically different styles of indignation or complaint (as Miller points out, weak disgust is no longer really disgust). As the French writer Bernard Noël worries, “Revolt acts; indignation seeks to speak. From the start of my childhood, only reasons for becoming indignant: the war, the deportation, the Indochinese War, the Korean war, the Algerian war.” But as Noël notes, “There’s no language [to describe this] because we live in a bourgeois world, where the vocabulary of indignation is exclusively moral.” The moralization of aversive rhetoric, already present in the effort to depolemicize class envy which we examined in Chapter 3, puts a further constraint on what Noël acknowledges to be its already limited force: unlike revolt, which acts, revoltedness merely tries to speak. Indeed, a moralizing tone inadvertently seeps into the indignant language which Noël uses to problematize the moralization of indignation, though in a manner that provides a perfect illustration of his point. But perhaps the more obvious explanation for the asymmetrical attention to desire and disgust in literary and cultural theory is the latter’s more spectacular appropriation by the political right throughout history, as a means of reinforcing the boundaries between self and “contaminating” others that has perpetuated racism, anti-Semitism, ho-
mophobia, and misogyny. Miller suggests that the worst aspects of disgust’s awful political past can be traced to the relatively late arrival of democracy, which he provocatively describes as a society defined not so much by a more equitable distribution of rights or respects as by a more equitable distribution of contempts. This democracy of “mutual contempt” would theoretically make the low’s repugnance for the high expressible in previously unsuspected ways—though Miller is careful to say that its primary and more equivocal effect has been to make possible the low’s contemptuous indifference to the high. Here, the putative democratization of aversive emotion, in the milder form that is no longer truly disgust but contempt, curtains rather than fosters historical possibilities of revolt, culminating in the fundamentally indifferent tolerance (however negatively inflected) that true disgust, which perceives its object as harmful and infectious rather than “safely ignorable,” cannot allow (Miller, AD, 181).

While the question of whether disgust is or behaves like a “moral sentiment” is debatable, the agonistic emotion certainly has no moral cachet. Even if one accepts Miller’s argument that disgust “ranks and orders us in hierarchies” by making assessments of inferiority and superiority, and, in particular, by doing the moral work of disapprobation or blame (we will soon see a fault-line in this argument), few would argue that any of these actions (blaming, ranking, demarcating status) constitutes a virtue in itself. Moreover, like envy, paranoia, and other feelings that are more likely to be objects of moral disapprobation rather than ways of expressing it, disgust is neither of the left or of the right and has the capacity to be summoned in either direction. The fact that the political right has more visibly and unhesitatingly instrumentalized its disgust throughout history does not mean, however, that the left lacks or should suppress its own—particularly if the harmful and contaminating qualities it identifies as intolerable are those of racism, misogyny, or the militarism of a political administration. Perhaps it is awareness of the right’s more flagrant conscription of dis-
gust as a powerful political tool that steers Martha Nussbaum into making the rather strange claim that, regardless of its object, disgust is inherently immoral: "If no emotion is per se morally good, there may be some that are per se morally suspect, whose cognitive content is more likely than not to be false or distorted, and linked with self-deception. Such is the argument I have made for disgust. . . . We might make related arguments about envy." But is there something morally suspect about one's disgust for feces or rotting meat? Given disgust's urgency that its object be rejected, is there even time to make a judgment about one's "superiority" over the feces or meat? It seems just as odd to claim there is something "false" or "self-deceptive" about the envy that the poor might have for the rich, or that the amputated might have for those able to walk. However irrational, Nussbaum's claims about the immorality "per se" of envy and disgust are ultimately consistent with her effort to build an "ethical theory" of emotion whose fundamentals are sympathy, identification, and compassion. Disgust and envy, which are not immoral but amoral—and thus inevitably prone to uglification by moralists—block sympathetic identification, as the third chapter of this book has shown. In any case, the moralization of the language of indignation that troubles Noël cannot register as a potential problem for Nussbaum, since it is an act in which her own account of emotions willingly participates.

In fixing its object as "intolerable," disgust undeniably has been and will continue to be instrumentalized in oppressive and violent ways. Yet its identification of its object as intolerable can also be mobilized against what Herbert Marcuse calls "repressive tolerance": the "pure," "indiscriminate," or nonpartisan tolerance that maintains the existing class structure of capitalist democracy. As an important corollary to his concept of "repressive desublimation," which warns against a false understanding of desire as liberatory per se, Marcuse's critique of "pure" tolerance does not amount to a rejection of tolerance altogether. In eliminating social conflict and violence, tolerance is a political necessity, Marcuse argues, but can
become “an end in itself” only in a “truly humane” society that does not yet exist. Though in its historical origins tolerance was “a partisan goal, a subversive liberating notion and practice,” in the later twentieth century “the political locus of tolerance has changed: while it is more or less quietly and constitutionally withdrawn from the opposition, it is made compulsory behavior with respect to established policies” (“RT,” 82). Highlighting the political equivocality of the indifferent tolerance of the low for the high that Miller describes as uniquely achieved in our democracy of “mutual contempt,” Marcuse writes, “Tolerance is turned from an active into a passive state, from practice to non-practice: laissez faire the constituted authorities. It is the people who tolerate the government, which in turn tolerates opposition within the framework determined by the constituted authorities. Tolerance toward that which is radically evil now appears as good because it serves the cohesion of the whole on the road to affluence or more affluence” (“RT,” 82–83). Arguing against an “equality of tolerance [that] becomes abstract, spurious” and that can therefore be justified only “in harmless debates, in conversation, [and] in academic discussion,” Marcuse claims that in “a society of total administration . . . the conditions under which tolerance can again become a liberating and humanizing force still have to be created” (“RT,” 111). This calls for “discriminatory tolerance,” however oxymoronic the term may sound.

It is crucial to note that “Repressive Tolerance” is a leftist critique of pluralism in the political state and not in culture per se; Marcuse explicitly states that he will discuss this question “only with reference to political movements, attitudes, schools of thought, philosophies which are ‘political’ in the widest sense” (“RT,” 91). Although my much more delimited concern here is with the asymmetrical fates of disgust and desire in literary theory, there are two aspects of his argument that I wish to draw out in particular. The first is that the object of tolerance in any affluent, market-centered democracy is perceived to be harmless or rela-
tively unthreatening. Its ability to be tolerated in this sociopolitical context thus becomes an index of its sociopolitical ineffectuality—in particular, its ineffectuality as a mechanism for dissent and change. From the vantage point of this market society, the best example of such a feckless thing—a thing taken as so ineffectual, harmless, and “safely disattendable” that it can be absently or even benevolently tolerated—is art. Which is why even in a critique expressly restricted to the domain of politics proper, art becomes the privileged illustration of what Marcuse perceives as one of the most antipgressive consequences of indiscriminate tolerance or pluralism: its conversion of multiplicity into commensurability.21

The danger of “destructive tolerance” (Baudelaire), of “benevolent neutrality” toward art has been recognized: the market, which absorbs equally well (although with often quite sudden fluctuations) art, anti-art, and non-art, all possibly conflicting styles, schools, forms, provides a “complacent receptacle, a friendly abyss” [Edward Wind, Art and Anarchy] in which the radical impact of art, the protest of art against the established reality is swallowed up. (“RT,” 88)

Aesthetic pluralism, in its immediate relationship to the market, thus provides Marcuse with a useful analogy for the limitations of political pluralism. Nowhere is this conjoining of aesthetic and political pluralism more visible than in postmodern culture as a whole. If—as Ellen Rooney points out—pluralism, more than any political theory currently in circulation, dominates our way of understanding democracy to such an extent that “democracy” and “political pluralism” tend to be perceived as identical (SR, 17–18), commentators from disciplines across the humanities have increasingly used “pluralism” and “postmodernity” as synonyms for each other. Andreas Huyssen defines “postmodernism,” for example, as “cultural eclecticism or pluralism,” and Alex Callinicos characterizes it as a situation in which “cultural life becomes more frag-
mented or pluralistic.”22 And pluralism or eclecticism, as Hal Foster notes, has become a defining attribute not only of contemporary artistic practice, but of the theory and criticism of artistic practice as well.

Art exists today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is also an alibi. As a general condition pluralism tends to absorb argument—which is not to say that it does not promote antagonism of all sorts. One can only begin out of a discontent with this status quo: for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent. Minor deviation is allowed only in order to resist radical change, and it is this subtle conformism that one must challenge.23

Perhaps here is a good place to offer one last explanation for the disproportionate amount of attention paid to configurations of attraction and repulsion in the past several decades of literary and cultural criticism, though an explanation that may seem less self-evident than the others previously discussed. There is a sense in which it is hardly surprising that desire is theoretically attractive and that the affective idiom of disgust disgusts, in a manner that recalls the autoreferentiality of Silvan Tomkins’ affect system. Yet we might suspect that both the academic attraction to the “desire” associated with a polysemous fluidity starkly opposed to and privileged over semantic fixation, and, correspondingly, our relative inattention to aversion, have something also to do with the fact that the former seems especially consonant with critical or aesthetic pluralism in ways that the fundamentally exclusionary idiom of disgust is not. For the hegemonic pluralism of both the academy and the larger society is (as Rooney argues) a mode of “seductive reasoning” that conscripts the appealing rhetoric of inclusivity to exclude critical discourses of exclusion—in particular, those which take
"the process of exclusion to be necessary to the production of meaning or community" (Rooney, SR, 5).

My point is not that the idiom of disgust is inherently more "radical" than a desire taken as a metaphor for "the pluralization of meaning by different means," or that the agonistic emotion has better rather than simply different theoretical possibilities to offer. It is rather that with its tropes of semantic multiplicity, slippage, and flow, with its general logic of inclusivity and strong centripetal pull, the academically routinized concept of "desire" is simply more concordant, ideologically as well as aesthetically, with the aesthetic, cultural, and political pluralisms that have come to define the postmodern than an emotional idiom defined by its vehement exclusion of the intolerable. If, in the context of a hegemonic pluralism that willfully misidentifies multiplicity with commensurability, the risk of "desire" is that of devolving into a "convenient receptacle" or "friendly abyss" for any form of "literary heterogeneity" or perceived transgression of the symbolic status quo, disgust's vulnerability as a poetics would seem to derive in part from pluralism's ability to manipulate the rhetoric of consensus and inclusivity in order to reduce oppositional and exclusionary formations to "monolithic totalitarianism[s]" (Rooney, SR, 27). This has been the fate of Marxism in particular, Rooney points out, in the American public sphere, where the mainstream media repeatedly marshal the language of "consensus" to caricaturize late twentieth-century socialist movements as "betrayals" of pluralism. Hence, "political pluralism, 'American-style,' is nothing but the exclusion of marxisms, both in domestic politics and abroad" (Rooney, SR, 27). As Hal Foster similarly points out, "Somehow, to be an advocate of pluralism is to be democratic—is to resist the dominance of any one faction (nation, class or style). But this is no more true than the converse: that to be a critic of pluralism is to be authoritarian" ("AP," 30).

If the poetics of desire that has dominated literary theory thus seems compatible with aesthetic, critical, and even political plural-
ism in ways that disgust is not, the argument can be reversed to suggest that a poetics of disgust would seem incompatible with pluralism, and with the ethic of indiscriminate tolerance that subtends it, in ways that desire is not. If tolerance itself is an emotional continuum, we can think of it as having positive and negative borders—the former consisting in what Marcuse calls “benevolent neutrality” (as exemplified in the market’s friendly attitude toward art), and the latter in something akin to Hobbes’s indifferent contempt. In a somewhat surprising fashion, given our common understanding of disgust and contempt as cousins rather than antagonists, there is a sense in which disgust does the work of blocking both. For if benevolence or pity can be a way of managing aversion to an object perceived as socially inferior (in order to maintain what Miller calls its “disattendability”), disgust can be a prophylactic against the contempt that marks the negative limit of that disattendability—one that already assumes its object to be relatively unthreatening, only mildly offensive if offensive at all.

Let us simply say, then, that in its centrifugality, agonism, urgency, and above all refusal of the indifferently tolerable, disgust offers an entirely different set of aesthetic and critical possibilities from the one offered by desire. It also, of course, offers a different set of limitations. Since we have already discussed these limitations (which have tended to be fairly self-evident), I would like to conclude by briefly examining some of the possibilities, using two late twentieth-century works that make use of the emotional idiom most associated with the question of what can and cannot be “swallowed up” (that is, what can and cannot be tolerated, benevolently or contemptuously) in ways that enable them to reflect upon the limited agency of art itself in a commodified society. As Bartlebyan allegories of how literature itself might respond to the market’s disarmingly friendly tolerance of art—a tolerance that assumes its social ineffectuality or innocuousness—both can be taken as final demonstrations of the unique role ugly feelings can play, not only
as interpretations of the predicament of blocked or suspended agency, but also as interpretations of art's suspended sociopolitical agency in particular.

Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's *Passion According to G.H.* (1964), which could be read either as a philosophical meditation or a religious parody, is fundamentally the story of a woman smashing—and finally eating—a cockroach.24 It is also the story of how the experience leads to the narrator's "depersonalization," which she describes as "the greatest externalization one can attain" (*PGH*, 168). This "externalization," which allows G.H. to discover that "the world interdepended with me," parallels the fate of the cockroach in the story, pointing to a striking identification between the disgusted (human) and the disgusting (object).

The pulp started slowly to come out of the cockroach I had smashed, like out of a tube.

The cockroach's pulp, which was its insides, raw matter that was whitish and thick and slow, was piling up on it as though it were toothpaste coming out of the tube.

Before my nauseated, attracted eyes, the cockroach's form, as it grew on the outside, kept slowly changing. The white matter was slowly spreading across its back, like a load set for it to carry. Pinched in place, it was increasingly carrying on its dusty back a load that was in fact its own body.

"Scream," I silently commanded myself. (*PGH*, 54)

In a hyperbolic version of the Lawyer's effort to manage his aversion to Bartleby with "charity," G.H. desires to reverse the "sin" of her repugnance by committing an "anti-sin": "putting into my own mouth the white paste from the cockroach" (157). As hilarious as it is awful, G.H.'s effort to spiritually redeem her disgust by the self-martyring act of ingesting the intolerable highlights the ludicrousness of the moralization of disgust in the first place: If there is something "per se morally suspect" about vehement repugnance, as Nussbaum argues, why not attempt to absolve oneself of this "sin"
in the comically “logical” way G.H. does above? G.H.’s passion might also be read as a particularly horrible take on Kant’s definition of the disgusting as something “represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment.” For in its comparison to toothpaste, the “raw matter” obtrudes as if it were intended for cleaning the very orifice in which it is to be consumed. It therefore offers “redemption” for both the sin of disgust and the self-contamination resulting from the effort to absolve that sin by ingesting the intolerable.

For redemption must be in the thing itself. And redemption in the thing itself would be my putting into my own mouth the white paste from the cockroach.

At just the idea I closed my eyes with the force of someone locking her jaws, and I clenched my teeth so tight that any more and they would break right out of my mouth. My insides said no, my mass rejected the cockroach’s mass.

. . . I tried to reason with my disgust. Why should I be disgusted by the mass that came out of the cockroach? had I not drunk of the white milk that is the liquid maternal mass? . . . But reason didn’t get me anywhere, except to keep my teeth clenched together. (PGH, 157)

Despite her rational attitude that “disgust contradicts me, contradicts the matter in me,” the protagonist’s attempt to neutralize this disgust—first with reason, then with the perhaps all too rational act of attempting to ingest the matter she finds intolerable—fails (PGH, 156). Fueled by the desire to spiritualize or beautify, if not (as in the case of the Lawyer) professionally manage her disgust, G.H. eventually does eat the cockroach. Yet her body rejects it in spite of herself: “I dug my fingernails into the wall: now I tasted the bad taste [vomit] in my mouth, and then I began to spit, to spit out furiously that taste of nothing at all [the cockroach]. . . . I spit myself out, never reaching the point of feeling that I had finally spit out my whole soul. . . . I spat and spat and it kept on being me”
(160). However “externalizing,” the self-transcendence G.H. hopes to attain from her passion is finally denied.

If *The Passion According to G.H.* can be read as an allegory of the failure of a reverent effort to absorb the intolerable from the perspective of the disgusted, the American poet Bruce Andrews, in his collection *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up, or Social Romanticism* (1992), might be said to explore the limits of “pure” tolerance from the perspective of the disgusting. This is not done by narrativizing disgust, as Lispector does in *The Passion*, but through a poetry unusually crowded with the linguistic equivalents of what Lispector calls “raw matter”—expletives, onomatopoeia, and proper names. Here, for instance, is the beginning of “It’s Time to Stop Glorifying the White Army,” a poem fairly representative of *Shut Up* as a whole:

> It’s time to stop glorifying the white army. Swollen household clouds complain, guts galore Victorian nephews recolonize Brazil; I decided to serve Lipton tea to the chaingang. It’s fun to raise pet sea-monkeys!—coin-operated vaginal nutrition—my borders are vulnerable, my borders are vulnerable! Find body of CIA witness silky legs stapled to parquet floors.
> Forget the Alamo: may your happiness be as deep as Loch Ness, and your troubles be swallowed by the Monster. The fender has to fit the car.25

As violently comical as Melville’s “Bartleby,” though it is hard to imagine two works that seem less alike, *Shut Up* is also insistently ugly. Indeed, most readers would agree that no contemporary American poet has continued the modernist avant-garde’s project of decoupling art from beauty, or developed the negative aesthetic already latent in Kant’s definition of the disgusting as the endpoint of mimetic art, as consistently or aggressively as Andrews. In a market society whose dominant attitude to art is one of “benevo-
lent neutrality,” as Marcuse argues, one could say that the desire of this poetry is to become intolerable—in particular, intolerable to the extent that it cannot be absorbed by the pluralist economy of an aesthetic eclecticism, whose inclusive pull is as strong as the externalizing tow of G.H.’s disgust. There is a sense, then, in which Shut Up and “Bartleby”—despite the fact that they are worlds apart—share a common goal: both activate an ugly feeling to disclose the limits of the “social disattendability” that enables friendly as well as disdainful tolerance for an object perceived as so unthreatening in its inferiority as to be barely perceptible at all. While the strategy of Bartleby is to exaggerate this disattendability by turning it on himself, as evinced most in his refusal to eat, the agenda of Shut Up is to occupy more aggressively the position of the disgusting and unconsumable (if not exactly, as its intransient tone indicates, the abject)—of that which can no longer be the object of the indifference that is Hobbesian contempt, because it so insistently obtrudes. In a text as committed as Melville’s to disclosing the political ambiguities of social disattendability, though by creating the semblance of something that looks more like Tourette’s syndrome—the socially stigmatizing affliction defined by the uncontrolled expression of socially stigmatized content (obscenities, expletives, and so forth)—than like the “depression” we are often tempted to attribute to the emotionally unreadable scrivener, it seems telling that virtually every statement in Andrews’ Shut Up has the insistence or rhetorical effect of an expletive or onomatopoeia, or is an expletive or onomatopoeia per se. Significantly, both noisy intensities are forms which Saussure bracketed as potential threats to his theory of the arbitrary and unmotivated sign, and whose exceptionality he quickly neutralized with qualifications: “Onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally supposed... Interjections, closely related to onomatopoeia, can be attacked on
the same grounds and come no closer to refuting our thesis.”

Interjections figure prominently also in Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspects of language that run counter to its perceived primary use in naming or describing objects, “whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences.” As Wittgenstein notes, “Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions: Water! Away! Ow! Help! Fine! No!” To which Andrews might add: “It’s fun to raise pet sea-monkeys!” We could say that the predominant function of the linguistic raw matter in Andrews’ poetry is that of insisting; and that its agency—to reuse a pun Lacan plants in the title of his essay, “L’Instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient, ou La Raison depuis Freud” (“The Agency of the Letter”)—resides precisely in this insistence (l’instance). This is the case for “Ow!” and “Help!”—utterances whose expressive power paradoxically lies in their inability to describe or refer, particularly in the urgent situations in which they tend to be used. In 

*Shut Up*, variations of the last exclamation in Wittgenstein’s list abound in particular: “Scrape me off!”; “Gestalt me out!”; “Cream on my righteousness!”; “Whip my multiples!”; “My roots, no thanks”; “Do I have a receptacle for you!”—all forms of disgust’s unambiguous “No!” to its object.

In their negative insistence, there is a sense in which the linguistic materials privileged in 

*Shut Up* resemble what Lyotard calls “tensors,” referring to the “tension” in a sign that exceeds any semiotic dialectic of vertical fixation and horizontal displacement, including the “interminable metonymy” of slippage from word to word we have seen privileged in the use of “desire” as a figurative catch-all for any kind of literary polyvalency or multiplicity. Lyotard’s favorite example of the tensor is the proper name, a form that reminds us that while all signs are prone to semantic pluralization and slippage, not all are prone to this equally; some, like *Alamo* or *Lipton Tea*, have an “intensity” that makes them more resistant—if only slightly—to polysemous voyages. Because the proper name “refers in principle to a single reference” (think of “Harvey
Milk” or “Beirut”) and is therefore less capable, however small the increment of difference, of being “exchangeable against other terms in the logico-linguistic structure,” Lyotard argues that “there is no intra-systemic equivalent of the proper name, it points towards the outside like a deictic, it has no connotation, nor it is interminable.” Hence, while subject to resignification like any other sign, the proper name is always in some fashion more difficult to budge, countering the principle of infinite transferability that underlies the polysemous slippage routinely preferred but often too starkly opposed to semantic fixation in poetics of “desire.” It comes as no surprise, then, that Shut Up is glutted with proper names—those of media figures, political figures, and commodities in particular: “I came dressed as a Pearl Buck novel” (“Tuck in Your Chains”); “Fassbinder was sucking the Hegel out of Habermas” (“Blab Mind Blab Body”); “Brezhnev / dies / from Tidy-Bowl injections” (“Everything You Didn’t Know Is Wrong”); “Riot Act is new name for cops” (“Gesalt Me Out!”). If Whitman, America’s first self-professed materialist poet and speaker of “blab,” was also its first writer to produce poems filled with these insistently obtruding signs (Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff; Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye; Kentuckian, Louisiana, Georgian; Vermont, Maine, Texas), to read Shut Up is to encounter the intensities of Mao, Santa Claus, Darwin, Mary Poppins, Joe Worker, Ku Klux Klan, Snow White, Moonies, Davy Crockett, Hardy Boys, Arafat, King Kong, Reagan, Liz Taylor, Billy Graham, Nixon, Trotsky, John Quincy Adams, Svengali, Calvin Coolidge, Yoko Ono, Allende, Marie Antoinette; Porsche, Marlboro, Saran Wrap, Mr. Clean, Harley Davidson, Ladies Home Journal, Jimmy Crack Corn, Motown, The Love Boat, Donald Duck, Felony Augmentation Program, Girl Scout, MIRV, Cold War, CIA, PLO, Lotto, Christian Science, Republicanos, Hi Hi Whoopee; Korean, Sioux, Marine, Catholic, Palestinian, Black Nationalist; El Salvador, West Bank, Laos, Beirut, Honduras, Nigeria, Iran, Vietnam, and Nebraska. That is, to be crammed full with nothing less than the pluralist American public sphere itself and the culture industries
in which all of the intensities above are so easily and eclectically mingled.

Yet of course the centrifugal aesthetic of Andrews could not distance him further from Whitman—the American poet of pluralist desire and libidinalized mingling par excellence. This is not to imply, however, that the matter of pleasure or libidinal attraction, particularly to all the things that clamor “eat me” or “have me” in consumer culture, is either missing or expunged from Shut Up—nothing could be further from the case. For what is at stake in the work’s mobilization of disgust (or, more precisely, in the work’s desire to be disgusting, contaminating, unignorable, intolerable) is precisely revulsion’s dialectical relation to the fascination we can glimpse even in a work as unambiguously critical of consumer society as Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay “The Culture Industry” (1944). From the striking relish with which the proper names of individual products are uttered, one gets the sense that the authors are indeed fascinated, if not exactly amused, by Lone Ranger, Mrs. Miniver, Chesterfield Cigarettes, Greta Garbo, Life Magazine, Warner Brothers, General Motors, Guy Lombardo, Dagwood, Enrico Caruso, and Life with Father, even as these products and their claim to the aesthetic are emphatically denounced as examples of “Enlightenment as mass deception” (which is the subtitle of “The Culture Industry”). Like G.H. in front of her raw matter, the two critics seem nauseated, attracted.” But while the dialectic of repugnance and attraction is disclosed here through what Miller calls “the disgust of reaction formation,” where it is precisely the turning of Mrs. Miniver into a bad object that increases its allure, in Shut Up it is revealed through what Miller calls, in contrast, “the disgust of surfeit” (AD, 114). Whereas the former makes the disgusting alluring, in the latter the once-alluring is made disgusting—precisely by being that on which the subject deliberately gorges himself. As in the case of the binge smoker or eater who finds something about cigarettes or chocolates repulsive after consuming far too many in one sitting, the disgust of surfeiting desire, which also has the power to
make the one who is disgusted disgusting (if only to himself or herself), “pays us back for getting us just what we thought we wanted” (Miller, *AD*, 119). This is precisely the strategy of Andrews’ comical text in its complex relationship to a public sphere virtually coeval with the marketplace, the inclusive pull of whose attractions the poet cannot repress or deny even when they become objects of his individual aversion. We could say that whereas G.H. eats the intolerable in an unsuccessful effort to keep it down, *Shut Up* gorges on the alluring in order to throw it up. Both texts thus model two of art’s possible responses to a pluralist consumer society’s neutral or even friendly tolerance of it. In one, art becomes disgusted, staging its refusal or inability to ingest what consumer culture proclaims all should want or desire to take in (and what aesthetic pluralism proclaims all are capable of taking in). In the other, art crams itself with what has been officially deemed desirable to a point at which it crosses a line from being disgusted to being disgusting—that is, an object that we ourselves as readers can no longer easily consume without disclosing the limits of the “pure” tolerance that signals the curtailed agency of all art in the public sphere in general. For while it may be the case, as Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, that “art is objectively intolerant even of the socially dictated pluralism of peaceably coexisting spheres, which ever and again provides ideologues with excuses,” he also notes that “the shadow of art’s autarchic radicalism is its harmlessness”—the same harmlessness that casts a political shadow over the refusals, however consistent and uncompromising, of Melville’s emotionally illegible scrivener.30

We thus return, full circle, to the Bartlebyan predicament of suspended or curtailed agency that each of the minor affective idioms in this book has been summoned to interpret. Like animatedness, irritation, envy, anxiety, stuplimity, and paranoia—nonstrategic affects characterized by weak intentionality and characteristic of the situation of scriveners—disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully. But while all of the negative affects we have discussed call attention to this
problem, the poetics of disgust seems to have drawn us closer to the domain of political theory, perhaps even of political commitment, than these others. In its intense and unambivalent negativity, disgust thus seems to represent an outer limit or threshold of what I have called ugly feelings, preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions. It therefore brings us to the edge of this project on the aesthetics of minor affects, marking the furthest it can go.


41. Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, 87.


*afterword*

1. Jonathan Dollimore, “Sexual Disgust,” paper presented at “Dirt: An Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference,” Harvard University, March 1995. This afterword is inspired by Dollimore’s observation, as well as by his following comment that he did not intend to propose a “theory of disgust.” (Why not? I wondered.) Unlike Dollimore, when speaking of “desire” throughout this essay, I will be referring not to sexuality or sexual practices but to theories of textual production and reception based on libidinal metaphors.


11. The opinions of others obviously inform what counts as desirable to us in the first place; my point is that once the desirability of the object is established, we do not ask that others feel exactly what we feel toward it.
18. Even though Nussbaum's attempt to argue for an ethics of emotion is made in the domain of moral philosophy (and is directed, one suspects, at a minority holdout of analytical philosophers who have resisted acknowledging the evaluative or cognitive dimensions of emotion), a reader cannot help wondering if one really needs more than 750 pages to make the argument that love is a good thing.
20. On repressive desublimation (also referred to as "institutionalized," "adjusted," and "controlled" desublimation), see Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston:


29. Ibid., 55.
