

Disgust, Appreciation, and Hume's Emotional Conversion

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Carolyn Korsmeyer has offered some compelling arguments for the role of disgust in aesthetic appreciation. In the course of this project, she considers and holds up for justifiable criticism the account of emotional conversion proposed by David Hume in "Of Tragedy" (Korsmeyer 161). I will consider variant interpretations of Humean conversion and pinpoint a proposal that may afford an explanation of the ways in which aesthetic absorption can depend on and be intensified by the emotion of disgust.

Most of the material in Hume's essay is readily applicable to all cases in which a given work gives rise both to positive and aversive responses. It is by no means restricted to tragedy alone. Indeed, many of the examples deployed in "Of Tragedy" have more to do with melodrama than high art, reinforcing the contention that the essay affords a broad range of application. It also seems, as Korsmeyer indicates, that Hume's account is especially well suited to explaining the peculiar relation of dependency that can exist between disgust and fascination. However, Hume's account of emotional conversion, as Korsmeyer and others have observed, is more than a little ambiguous. Hume begins by stressing that our enjoyment of works that give rise to passions typically considered disagreeable is due to artistry:

By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us. The same force of oratory,

employed on an uninteresting subject, would not please half so much, or rather would appear altogether ridiculous; and the mind, being left in absolute calmness and indifference, would relish none of those beauties of imagination or expression, which, if joined to passion, give it such exquisite entertainment. The impulse or vehemence, arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty. The latter, being the predominant emotion, seize the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature. And the soul, being, at the same time, roused by passion, and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful (Hume, “Of Tragedy” 220).

Even if the nature and function of the above-described conversion process is difficult to ascertain, it is nonetheless apparent that Hume’s treatment of so-called “uneasy” passions is well suited to an analysis of aversive reactions like disgust, whether Hume intended this to be so or not. While Hume himself does not identify disgust as one of the uneasy passions surveyed, the account offers several excellent prospects for forging an alliance between disgust and appreciation.

However, there exists an impediment to co-opting Humean conversion in an effort to understand the role of disgust in aesthetic contexts. One is given momentary pause by Hume’s criticism in the same essay of excessive blood and gore, something that might be seen as a direct attack on the artistic worth of works that arouse disgust:

An action, represented in tragedy, may be too bloody and atrocious. It may excite such movements of horror as will not soften into pleasure; and the greatest energy of expression, bestowed on descriptions of that nature, serves only to augment our uneasiness. Such is that action represented in the *Ambitious Stepmother*, where a venerable old man, raised to the height of fury and despair, rushes against a pillar, and striking his head upon it, besmears it all over with mingled brains and gore. The English theatre abounds too much with such shocking images (Hume, “Of Tragedy” 224).

Whatever conclusions we may draw from Hume’s having launched the preceding indictment, we should certainly not consider it dated. I read similar criticisms only the other day of a production of *Titus Andronicus* and its graphic depiction of the plight of the unfortunate Lavinia. Such productions undoubtedly give rise to disgust and horror and aversion. It need not follow from this, however, that disgust cannot contribute to aesthetic effects. I do not believe that Hume, as Kant did, considers the disgusting to be impervious to the transformative effects of art (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 155). I am convinced, in fact, that Hume’s criticism of *The Ambitious Stepmother* has Aristotelian roots (Dadlez). In Chapter 14 of the *Poetics*,

Aristotle compares works that arouse emotion by means of plot development with those that do so by resorting to spectacle alone (Aristotle Poetics 1453b). Works that resort to spectacle to arouse the reactions they do are clearly thought to be inferior. So, an objection to the kind of scene under consideration would not be to the arousal of disgust in itself, but to the (quick and dirty) *way* it was aroused. Was the scene included in order to create distress without anyone being put to the bother of constructing a properly suspenseful or moving plot that could produce similar but more profound emotional effects? Or, was there a simple miscalculation, resulting in the arousal of a negative emotion too strong to be suborned to aesthetic purposes? The latter is another kind of difficulty that Aristotle reports may arise when inferior plot structures are employed. Hume's problem does seem to concern the spectacle itself, targeting either a miscalculation of effects or downright aesthetic sloth. Later in "Of Tragedy" Hume indicates that an imbalance in emotional responses inimical to aesthetic appreciation is bound to result when stories depict the virtuous being crushed "under the triumphant tyranny and oppression of vice" (224). Aristotle makes precisely the same point about the inferiority of plots that depict the irredeemably virtuous falling from good fortune to bad (Aristotle, Poetics 1452b). In either case, it is not the arousal of disgust itself that is unaesthetic.

Let us, then, consider what interpretations of the passage about emotional conversion are available, and then further consider the applicability of those accounts to the particular role that disgust might play in aesthetic response and appreciation. An account that demonstrates an occasional dependency of appreciation on disgust is particularly desirable, so the Humean approach is worth pursuing. It provides an alternative to the familiar analysis, which points simply to different responses to distinct intentional objects and remains mute on the subject of the effects that these distinct reactions may have on one another.

First, this passage might suggest, as Alex Neill proposes, that the conversion in question involves a transfer of vehemence or intensity or force from the negative or aversive emotion to the positive one. On this account, the negative passion does not blink out of existence or get replaced by some positive aesthetic reaction, but simply intensifies aesthetic absorption and interest without being obliterated in the process (Neill). Just as Korsmeyer is inclined to claim with respect to some examples, Neill resolutely contests the suggestion that positive responses eliminate negative ones, and further rejects the idea that a passion could retain its identity in spite of a revolution in or outright reversal of hedonic tone. Delving into Humean terminology, Neill suggests that the term "emotion" does not have the same referent as "passion." An emotional conversion might, on this account, signify the intensification of a predominant passion via some transfer of force, insofar as the predominant passion co-opts the vehemence of the subordinate.

Alternative readings of the passage are available, of course. Amyas Merivale takes talk of conversion to refer to ultimate eradication of the aversive passion, the

view challenged by both Neill and Korsmeyer (Merivale). He stresses that such an account would not force us to characterize our experience of tragedy or horror or suspense as uniformly pleasant—free, that is, of any negative or painful emotion. For one thing, Hume specifies neither frequency nor duration when discussing conversion. Both positive and negative responses might be simultaneously sustained for some considerable period, the negative concluding only with the conclusion of the work. Negative responses to different facets of the plot could reasonably be expected to arise and diminish in the course of our appreciating a single work, without this diminishment constituting an objection to the approach as a whole.

It may prove possible to accommodate aspects of both the preceding insights by focusing on Hume's use of "tincture" in describing the ways in which emotions can affect one another. Instead of maintaining that the negative passion is entirely effaced and aligning conversion always with eradication, we have, instead, a metaphor the vehicle of which invites us to think of tinctures and infusions, of mixtures and combinations and the blending of ingredients, of saturation and undertone. Such language can bring to mind transformations that occur in degrees or increments. In Neill's terminology, we could consider variable intensities, as of saturation or pigmentation. Hume himself uses the metaphor more than once in the *Treatise*. To give one example: "Contempt or scorn has so strong a tincture of pride, that there scarce is any other passion discernable: Whereas in esteem or respect, love makes a more considerable ingredient than humility" (390). In such an account, what Hume refers to as a subordinate passion may persist, altered but not extinguished by the predominant, or may be entirely transformed. That is, conversion, like transformation, may admit of degrees. Sometimes the negative response is virtually eradicated, and sometimes it is not, but merely serves to intensify aesthetic absorption and appreciation. Korsmeyer's concern that "Hume's position...would hardly accommodate the instances when disgust remains loathsome...yet is still profound and worth pondering" can be addressed by the alternative just suggested, which stresses an interdependence that may sometimes but need not always signal complete transformation (161).

I will use three examples from Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* to illustrate these different degrees of transformation with respect to the emotion of disgust. In one respect, of course, Ensler's aim is to lampoon a form of disgust with the female body so pervasive that it sometimes seems to extend to the very words used to refer to female body parts. In many parts of the United States, it is not even permissible to use the word "vagina" in advertising a performance: "A theatre in Florida had to change the title of a charity production of *The Vagina Monologues* on its marquee, after a woman complained that it was offensive. The new name? They decided on 'The Hoohaa Monologues ('No Vaginas')." One has but to read a few advertisements for feminine hygiene products from the 1950s to see the point as it is applicable to the feminine body itself. The association of the disgusting with the

feminine, moreover, has a venerable history. Kant, for whom disgust can never constitute a part of aesthetic appreciation, states that “Nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust, just as nothing sinks deeper beneath the sublime than the ridiculous. On this account no insult can be more painful to a man than being called a *fool*, and to a woman, than being called *disgusting*” (Kant, “On the Distinction” 83). Kant perfectly captures the still-existing relegation of women to a realm of gross physicality as well as the accompanying pressure to deny or suppress any such betrayal of humanity. Ensler has her work cut out for her. Accordingly, some of the monologues are intended merely to mock this disgust with the female body and to make it ridiculous. The speaker in a monologue about vaginal discharge, aptly entitled *The Flood*, shares this disgust. She cannot even utter the word “vagina”:

Down there? I haven't been down there since 1953. No, it had nothing to do with Eisenhower. No, no, it's a cellar down there. It's very damp, clammy. You don't want to go down there. Trust me. You'd get sick. Suffocating. Very nauseating. The smell of the clamminess and the mildew and everything. Whew! Smells unbearable. Gets in your clothes. (Ensler 25)

The speaker goes on to describe an incident during which she becomes aroused on account of a kiss. And, then a terrible thing happens:

There was a flood down there. I couldn't control it. It was like this force of passion, this river of life just flooded out of me, right through my panties, right onto the car seat of his new white Chevy Belair. It wasn't pee and it was smelly—well, frankly I didn't really smell anything at all, but he said, Andy said, that it smelled like sour milk and it was staining his car seat. I was “a stinky weird girl,” he said. (27)

Done properly, this monologue has the audience howling with laughter (especially when the flood, in a dream sequence, engulfs an entire restaurant, forcing Burt Reynolds to swim for his life). Here there is a near eradication of the original aversive reaction. The purpose is clearly political: to mock reactions of disgust—both those of the speaker and her revolted swain. The purpose is also to defuse prissiness and false delicacy about ordinary bodily functions. The humor in a proper performance really does diminish disgust almost entirely. Of course, this is a case where disgust itself is the subject of the monologue as well as a response to the things it describes. Still, something like the eradication interpretation seems adequately to describe the case.

But, other degrees of transformation seem to be involved in other monologues. Ensler invokes the reaction of disgust intentionally and repeatedly in the

Monologues, but in many other cases the aversive reaction is not at all dissipated. Rather, it appears to be vital in sustaining the aesthetic effect. A monologue entitled *My Vagina Was My Village* is about Bosnia, and chronicles cases of rape as a weapon of war. It alternates between two visions of sexuality by twining together the perspective of a normal, happy young woman with that of the victim of atrocities. The strand of the monologue belonging to the victim announces that she does not “touch anymore. Not now. Not since” (Ibid.). Each return to her voice and her story is introduced by the recurring refrain “not since”:

Not since I heard the skin tear and made lemon screeching sounds, not since a piece of my vagina came off in my hand, a part of the lip, now one side of the lip is completely gone (62).

Our horror and disgust at mutilation mirrors that of the speaker. The intention is again political, in that it is clearly to rouse in the audience a response of moral outrage not just against war and rape but against rape as a military strategy. Our aversive reaction to the descriptions in the monologue is crucial to the intensity and immediacy of the further moral response. Without a description graphic enough to arouse revulsion, there would be no anchor for the outrage, no deeper sense of the true nature of the objection. Disgust is the engine of an enlarged political insight.

In yet another case, disgust is used to anchor and to energize a celebration of embodiedness. *I Was There in the Room* is a joyous description of birth, with none of the gory bits elided:

I saw the colors of her vagina. They changed.
Saw the bruised broken blue
the blistering tomato red
the gray pink—the dark;
saw the blood like perspiration along the edges
saw the yellow, white liquid, the shit, the clots
pushing out all the holes, pushing harder and harder,
saw through the hole, the baby’s head
scratches of black hair, saw it just there behind
the bone—a hard round memory,
as the nurse from the Ukraine kept turning and turning
her slippery hand (122-123).

This example comes closest to the kind of alliance between and, indeed, fusion of beauty and disgust that Korsmeyer teases out at the conclusion of her book. The ooze and the clots, the blood and the shit, are all still what they are. They elicit the aversive response they always do. But, they are also triumphant, the necessary

condition for a particular kind of joy, the recognition of which constitutes part of the meaning of the work. It is the gross, coarse, smelly physicality of the process that is vital to our fully embracing it and knowing it for what it is. The disgusting remains disgusting but is nonetheless transformed by the context in which it is placed.

The preceding suggests that Hume's speculations about emotional conversion can contribute significantly to our understanding of how disgust can affect, infect, and enlarge aesthetic appreciation.

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