Chapter Five

MISANTHROPOLOGY, CONTINUED:

DISGUST, VIOLENCE, AND MORE ON VOYEURISM

By Alicia Chudo

Human emotions, behaviors, and purposes often contain implicit philosophical content.

For example, as William James stressed, the sentiment of regret presupposes indeterminism, since to regret a choice is to imagine that something else might have been chosen. Likewise, guilt would make no sense without both indeterminism and moral norms. Insofar as envy derives from the sense that someone else has gotten what we deserve, it already contains the concept of just allotment. And greed presumes that the kingdom of God is not entirely within us.

In some cases, the philosophical content remains more elusive. I would like to consider here a cluster of human reactions to violence and to the pain of others that may be less straightforward than they seem. I focus on voyeurism, identification, and disgust; understanding disgust will require a brief digression about laughter.

1 / Another Look at Voyeurism

The Violent Witness

When Dr. Johnson remarked that nothing so focuses the mind as the prospect of being hanged, he might have added the prospect of watching someone else being hanged. Or disemboweled. Or flayed alive. Or dissected.

I would like to focus not on violence, but on the act of watching it with interest, that is, on voyeurism. We usually think of acting as one thing and watching as quite another, but sometimes watching may be part of the total action. For that matter, it can be seen as an action in itself. The very term “voyeurism,” which is always pejorative, already

suggests that at least some looking is not morally neutral. We can be responsible for it, as we are for other actions.

When a person is publically put to shame—say, by being placed in the stockades, denounced from the pulpit, or forced to exhibit a scarlet letter—the knowledge that others are looking is an intrinsic, not incidental, part of the punishment. An act of physical punishment may be all the worse if it is done in public. Then the sufferer is an unwilling object not only of bodily torment but also of public exposure. He has become a spectacle and a source of voyeuristic pleasure.

Public commentators often ask whether fictional depictions of violence are corrupting? Should children be kept from watching gory television programs? Often enough, other commentators reply, isn't it extremely rare for someone to witness a film about a savage act and then go out and imitate it? Even children clearly know what is make-believe and do not just blindly imitate whatever they see.

These shallow answers reflect the naïveté of the initial question. To begin with, the question as it is usually phrased presumes that depicted violence is one thing and the act of watching it quite another, but a moment's consideration might suggest that watching may itself be morally compromising. Think of the Roman circus, which has become a virtual synonym for watching as morally corrupt action. There, watching is an intrinsic part of the spectacle, which would not exist without it. We might more properly ask not whether watching violence is corrupting but whether it is already corrupt.

The question as usually posed also ignores the role of habit. To be sure, very few people watch a single spectacle of titillating torture and then go out and make another person a victim. But even a single act of viewing may initiate awareness of a previously unsuspected kind of pleasure. If that pleasure is frequently indulged, it may become a need. Like all addictive desires, it may require ever greater doses and lead some people to crave the excitement that only a real victim can provide.

As If

Finally, it is far from true that the awareness of fictionality (make-believe) precludes real voyeuristic pleasure. If that were so, pornography would not work. For that matter, whenever we identify with a novelistic character, suffer with her misfortunes, or exult in her success, we do so without ceasing to be aware that we are reading

a novel. Such identification can lead to both moral improvement and moral corruption, as writers from Dante to Dickens have known.

When we identify with Anna Karenina, we accept her not as a real but as a *possible* person, and we experience what happens to her as possible events. The same is true with viewers of a horror film. Experiences possible in that sense may attract us to events possible in the other sense, that is, ones we might contemplate.

I Feel Your Pain

From Homer to Hollywood, violence to others has proven intoxicating.

Torture practiced on ourselves rarely leads us to want the experience prolonged, but when others are the victims, too many people—people unlike ourselves, of course—enjoy watching or thinking about the experience. Sophisticated folk who laugh at tabloids cultivate a taste for what they call “transgressive” representations of horror.

As with all human weaknesses, those who think themselves above this taste are most likely to be ambushed by it. Intellectuals shocked by peasant violence idolize terrorists.¹

People derive pleasure, often quite intense, from others’ pain. Ivan Karamazov observes, “I know there are people who are worked up to sensuality, to literal sensuality, which increases progressively at every blow they inflict. They beat for a minute, for five minutes, for ten minutes, more often and more savagely” (BK, 286). The two pleasures of inflicting suffering and watching it go well together.

One enjoys watching another suffer, and so one becomes a torturer.

One can imagine Ivan’s reaction to the fatuous argument that there is no reason for torture because it is a poor way of extracting information. Common sense ought to instruct that if torture were obviously pointless it would not be so common in all epochs. Apart from the fact that the argument is false—let the arguer imagine himself or herself withholding a secret under such circumstances—it presumes that the sole goal of torture is information. No one who has

¹ On such taste in intellectuals see Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

either received or deliberately inflicted deep humiliation could believe that. Nor is it much more profound to add the goal of controlling a population.

To be sure, the widespread knowledge of horrors beyond mere death can intimidate. Historians tell us that the Turks scared Venetians away from Mediterranean trade not just by seizing their ships and selling their crews into slavery, but also by flaying Venetian admirals alive. At this point, the traditional career for young Venetian noblemen began to seem considerably less attractive than the barely profitable cultivation of terra firma. Soviet show trials worked not just because some believed the absurd confessions, but because those who did not could imagine what treatment produced them. But even this dark view may not be dark enough.

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead* teaches that people love torture for no practical purpose at all, simply for its own sake. Corporal punishment exists not only to control others, but because the infliction of pain, including the fear of pain, provides a unique pleasure. Craving that pleasure is part of what makes us human. It is part of what Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov calls "the Karamazov baseness."

The narrator of *The House of the Dead* speculates that there is a bit of the Marquis de Sade or the Marquise de Brinvilliers in each of us:

I imagine that that there is something in this sensation [of inflicting pain] that sends a thrill at once sweet and painful.... Anyone who has experienced this power, this unlimited mastery of the body, blood and soul of a fellow man made of the same clay as himself, a brother in the law of Christ—anyone who has experienced the power and license to inflict the greatest humiliation upon another creature made in the image of God will unconsciously lose the mastery of his own sensations. Tyranny is a habit ... the mind and heart are tolerant of the most abnormal things, till at last they come to relish them (HoD, 240-241).

How mistaken we are to speak of torture as "dehumanization"! No, we must sense in the victim another *person*, one like ourselves, made of the same clay, in the image of God. Who wants to beat a corpse? Or a robot? It is time to stop using the word "humane" to mean kind and "humanity" as a synonym for benevolence, as if those qualities, and not their opposites, belonged to us as human beings. We in the university might also rethink what we mean by studying "the humanities."

This lesson about ourselves has been voiced often enough in misanthropological literature, from Swift to Orwell. In 1984, O'Brien demands that Winston, under torture, explain the regime's reasons for its cruel practices. When Winston gives the Grand Inquisitor's answer—that control serves the good of the people because they cannot govern themselves—O'Brien delivers a jolt of agony and tells Winston that such an answer is positively stupid:

Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of power is power. (1984, 217)

Lacerations

But are we really so bad? Isn't there a kind of reverse sentimentality in assuming only the worst of human nature? After all, misanthropology itself teaches that cynicism may involve self-deception by placing us above the illusions entertained by others. Dostoevsky's radicals often feel this superiority when they claim to have gone "beyond nihilism" since they have "rejected more." Cynicism can be a form of naïveté, much as doubting everything can be a form of credulity.

And so we may ask: is it not possible that, just as we take pleasure in another's pain, we are also genuinely pained by it? Do we not often sincerely reproach ourselves for the pleasure we do take? Yes, *schadenfreude*, properly understood, contains both reactions.

But it also contains a third. As witnesses of our own self-reproaches at enjoying the pain of others, we may enjoy our own pain! We take pleasure, are pained at our pleasure, and take pleasure in that pain, in an endless hideous cycle. This is a special kind of evil that relies on our good impulses to make us worse.

Dostoevsky called this phenomenon "lacerations" (*nadryvy*). We love tearing at our moral selves. We may humiliate ourselves out of pride. Such dynamics define the psychology of "the underground" that some have come to call ressentiment (with its sense of re-sentiment, sentiment repeated).

A taboo forbids what might otherwise be pleasurable; we take pleasure in breaking taboos, and so there is a taboo against enjoying taboo-breaking, which it is a special pleasure to break.

Taste and Distaste

Moral education typically involves learning that there is something shameful in enjoying another's pain and something disgusting in enjoying our own. In Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*, the hideous Katisha explains that she is "an acquired taste"; and as there are acquired tastes, there are acquired distastes. Moral education provides us with numerous acquired distastes. Once learned, they allow us to reject behaviors and resist pleasures almost instantaneously, as fast as we turn away from excrement, and much faster than could result from any process of moral reasoning. If you have to reason yourself out of enjoying torture, you are already morally hideous. Philosophers often seem to miss this point.

Acquired tastes often involve taking pleasure or finding beauty in what less sophisticated palates would find nauseating, such as consuming insects, rotting cheese, raw meat, or, one step further, the brains of still living animals. By the same token, acquired distastes leave us revolted by the pleasures of less educated people or of ourselves when we were still unformed. With ever finer gradations, taste and distaste mark status.

Unfortunately, one can teach people to overcome their distaste, as well as their taste, for immoral actions. No one wants to be called a "choir boy" or a "boy scout," and men who are too squeamish may be deemed effeminate. Others may enjoy the sight of that squeamishness. One can develop a taste for the sight of others' distaste for human suffering, which may constitute yet another reason to inflict it. One enjoys the pain initially inflicted and the pain of the squeamish audience: two enjoyments at once!

The Scientist and the Voyeur

Undeniably, we are fascinated by torture, both physical and psychological, but what exactly is it that fascinates us?

We may distinguish two sources: we may be interested in what is revealed and we may be interested at our own (and others') reactions to the revelation. The first is the pleasure of the scientist, the second of the voyeur. Of course, the two can go together.

Consider celebrated paintings depicting surgery and dissection. Thomas Eakins's *The Agnew Clinic* shows surgery's most up-to-date practices. Unlike the surgeon in Eakins's earlier painting, *The Gross Clinic*, Dr. Agnew wears not street clothes but an up-to-date antiseptic white

gown. He abides by the new practices that came in the wake of Lister's work on infection. One doctor is administering the anaesthetic, another taking the pulse, Agnew is holding a scalpel, and, most interesting of all, an audience of students, occupying half the painting, looks on. The painting was commissioned for a University of Pennsylvania medical school graduation (1889), at a time when the school boasted about its emphasis on dissection. It is still proudly shown on the Penn website, with each of the depicted people identified.

Ostensibly, we are watching a scientific demonstration and a clinical lesson; and we are watching an audience that looks on in the right scientific spirit. It is as if the painting were saying: any other attitude would be philistine.

The Gross Clinic depicts a similar scene, but with one notable difference. A woman—should we say a “mere” woman?—who is looking on covers her eyes in distress.² Are we supposed to regard her horror as a sign of what we should not feel and what medical students are too mature to feel?

Or is it possible that the painting acknowledges something wiser: that no matter how much the science may interest us, the sheer horror of dissection is always present and a covert source of enjoyment? If so, how are we to read the absence of any such signal in *The Agnew Clinic*? Could it be that, for all its “scientific realism,” the painting achieves its power precisely by inviting us to ask “unscientific” questions that its audience apparently does not?

Like Conan Doyle's dog that did not bark, does this painting portray the questions no one asks? I would like to ask: could the painting be a commentary on the purely detached scientific attitude it supposedly recommends?

Amputation and Us

In both Eakins paintings, the patient is anesthetized and barely visible. By contrast, the second floor of the International Museum of Surgical

² She is conventionally identified as the patient's mother. Michael Fried describes the viewer's fascinated repulsion and interprets the “excessiveness” of the mother's gesture “as if covering her eyes required a convulsive effort” as “a commentary on the painting as a whole,” including viewers' reactions. “Excessive” to whom? See Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 65.

Science in Chicago displays an enormous painting of a conscious man undergoing amputation. The patient writhes while a surgeon approaches him with a saw.

Captions indicate that the painting has been exhibited to show us what surgery was like before anaesthesia. Some questions suggested by the museum will convey a sense of the painting: "Why would the surgeon amputate the patient's leg? Why are there four men holding the patient down? What do you think happened to the patient after his leg is amputated?" The museum's explanatory plaque informs us that the most common cause of death from such operations was shock caused by pain.

None of these questions or comments alludes to the sheer eroticism of a muscular, naked young man completely in the power of others, much less the voyeuristic fascination with another's torture. The museum instructs us what to see in the tone of "questions for deeper comprehension" at the end of a textbook chapter. More important, it implicitly tells us what not to see, lest we show ourselves to be philistines incapable of scientific detachment.

But however much we acknowledge the importance of scientific advances and the heroism of pioneering surgeons, is it possible to see a conscious person undergoing amputation without experiencing horror? If it is possible, is it desirable? Once one can amputate with (pardon me) "detachment," what else can one do?

In Eakins's paintings, the patient is unconscious, but that only puts the horror at one remove. Something prompts us to wonder whether we can indeed be so sure that the unconscious patient feels no pain rather than, let us say, feeling it without remembering it afterward? Some have thought that patients in comas do feel pain, and that we must not mistake the absence of the usual signs of suffering for the absence of suffering. Could that not be the case here?

Even if an anesthetized patient experiences no pain, he still resembles ourselves all too closely. He, too, was recently conscious as we are, and will soon be again. This resemblance makes it almost impossible not to imagine what the patient would feel if conscious. And we may easily imagine the patient himself, after the operation, wincing at the thought of what must have happened to him as if he could still feel it; and we can easily share the pain behind that wincing.

If the Eakins paintings are meant to raise these questions, they are profound. If not, they are disturbingly shallow. Such shallowness evokes its own kind of horror.

Self-Exposure

Perhaps more than any other writer, Dostoevsky understood the peculiar mix of emotions we feel at watching another's torment. The very title of *The Insulted and the Humiliated* promises a look at psychological writhing, and almost all of Dostoevsky's works explore the inscape of insult. The insulted are usually aware not just of their humiliation, but also of the witnessing of their humiliation, an awareness that is itself witnessed, as they are also aware; and so on.

This infinite sequence also belongs to the psychology of the underground, as the underground man explains to us more than once. I say "to us" because the underground man treats his readers as if they were *present*, witnesses not exactly of the humiliating actions he describes but of the one he enacts in describing them. We are drawn into his drama, and even our disgust at his self-exposure and our resentment at being drafted into a scene of degradation turn out to initiate new humiliations, which we also view with disgust and resentment.

You will say that it is vulgar and base to drag all this into public after all the tears and raptures I have myself admitted.... But why is it base?... And yet you are right—it really is vulgar and base. And what is most base of all is that I have now started to justify myself to you. And even more base than that is my making this remark now. But that's enough, or, after all, there will be no end to it; each step will be more base than the last. (NFU, 51)

In *The Insulted and Humiliated*, Prince Valkovsky describes a French exhibitionist who enjoys the cynical pleasure of "throwing off the mask" and, beyond that, of making the onlooker aware that she looks at the scene *willingly*, if not out of eroticism then out of fascination with self-degradation. The viewer does what she refuses to do, and does so in the very act of refusing. Fyodor Pavlovich perfects the same psychology, as we first see in the "scandalous scene" in the elder's cell.

Not just the witnessing but even the refusal to witness makes one part of the drama.

Perhaps Ivan Karamazov signs his articles "the observer" to indicate that he is the eternal nonparticipant, but the novel demonstrates that adopting such a stance is itself a morally questionable action. In this novel, it is also the source of overt crimes. Without it the novel would lack its plot. Ivan comes to feel guilty precisely for having been *only* an observer.

In Genesis 9, Noah curses Ham for having witnessed his nakedness, whereas his two brothers had covered their father without looking. There could hardly be a clearer appreciation of the fact that looking is an action, and I suspect the story of Ivan, his two brothers, and his father alludes to it.

In Dostoevsky, no scene of suffering is complete without its audience. Raskolnikov sees such immoral witnessing and refuses to take part in it. He rushes to save the mare beaten in his dream and does what he can for the Marmeladovs. Unlike Ivan Karamazov, he will not remain a mere witness, because such a stance is morally tainted. Unfortunately, so is action. One might almost infer that he becomes a criminal in order to stop being a witness.

2 / Identification

In life as in Dostoevsky, witnesses of horror experience a thrill, but what psychological reactions lead to that thrill? What does it express?

I think that for Dostoevsky voyeuristic pleasure at the suffering of others presupposes two distinct human reactions. Each fascinates by its sheer intensity and each raises important questions about life and the soul in a compelling way. Each thereby makes philosophy palpable. Ultimate questions play directly on the nerves.

The first reaction is *identification*, the second is *disgust*. Let us begin with identification.

When we identify with a sufferer, we draw near and imagine ourselves in his or her place. In order to understand the human condition, we may want to understand its extreme forms. We all know that we are mortal and that our flesh is subject to a thousand natural shocks. We cannot help wondering what dying and extreme pain are like.

And so we observe them in reality or in an evocative depiction, all the while imagining ourselves in the sufferer's position but drawing back just when the identification becomes too painful. We vicariously join the sufferer until we reach our limit of vicarious endurance. That is the dynamic of identification: tentatively place yourself in the sufferer's position, then draw back and reflect, and then, perhaps, repeat.

Almost Too Close

Seeing how closely we can identify with the sufferer is a way of testing ourselves. We get to know something about ourselves not only as members of the human species but also as specific individuals. The nearer we draw to the limit of our endurance and to a surrender we can no longer stop, the more thrilling the test becomes.

Drawing almost too close: identification thrives on this kind of experience. In *Karamazov*, Lise explains the complex dynamics of approach and withdrawal when she describes a dream in which devils surround her. Just when they are about to seize her, she crosses herself. The devils retreat, but do not leave.

And suddenly I have a frightful longing to revile God aloud, and so I begin, and then they come crowding back at me, delighted, and seize me again, and I cross myself again and they all draw back. It's awful fun, it takes one's breath away. (BK, 709)

Alyosha confesses that he has had the same dream. The two seem to share a fascination with terror and with testing themselves.³

Striptease

La Rochefoucauld famously observed that “in the misfortune of our best friends, we always find something which is not displeasing to us” (YBQ, 443). Our sympathy for the friend can coexist with pleasure at one's superior lot. One's own good fortune always confirms the justice of the universe.

Dostoevsky liked to stress that we may be sincerely sympathetic with another's suffering, and yet also take pleasure in the thrill of witnessing disaster. Neither feeling precludes or is reducible to the other.

Even if we would risk our lives to save another, we cannot help being drawn to witness that person's most exquisite suffering. Why

³ Lise is struck by the fact that Alyosha and she have had the same terrifying dream. In *Anna Karenina*, serialized only a few years earlier, Anna and Vronsky have also have the same terrifying dream. Both novels take as a key theme the idea that looking is an action, and one with moral significance. When two people share a dream, they become joint witnesses in a way that is deeply mysterious, and that mystery makes the terror all the more powerful.

else would torture and execution once have been public events, and why are they now kept rigorously behind doors lest the spectacle corrupt onlookers? Both exposure and concealment testify to the same impulse.

In Myshkin's descriptions of execution in *The Idiot*, the condemned man's suffering includes enduring the gaze of others fixed upon him: "There were crowds of people, there was noise and shouting; ten thousand faces, ten thousand eyes—and all that he has had to bear, and worst of all the thought, 'They are ten thousand, but not one of them is being executed, and I am to be executed.'" (I, 59). Witnessing the execution, Myshkin himself experiences the same intense fascination, as he confesses to the Epanchins. Aglaia and Adelaida vicariously experience his vicarious experience, and are as fascinated as he:

"I did not like it at all and I was rather ill afterwards, but I must confess I was riveted to the spot; I could not take my eyes off it."

"I couldn't have taken my eyes off it either," said Aglaia.

"They don't like women to look on at it; they even write about such women in the papers."

"I suppose, if they consider that it's not fit for women, they mean to infer (and so justify it) that it is fit for men. I congratulate them on their logic. And you think so too, no doubt."

"Tell us about the execution," Adelaida interrupted (I, 57)

The gaze of others emphasizes the intense loneliness of the prisoner's dying and thereby adds to his pain. "We all die alone," Pascal wrote, but we don't all find ourselves stared at as our life is ending. It appears that we are most alone not when we are entirely by ourselves but when our loneliness is made public.

Such loneliness derives in part from the palpable sense that the onlookers exist in a different sort of time, one in which, as Myshkin explains, the future is open, whereas for the condemned man the end is certain. The crowd wants to understand what such dying would be like. It wants to make its controlled identification with the prisoner the source of knowledge about ultimate mysteries of the soul, but for the prisoner it is his own soul that becomes an object of inquiry. He is not watching a dissection, he is being dissected and watching those watching the process.

The lonely prisoner is stripped beyond mere nakedness, for it is his very soul that is exposed. Each step towards execution involves more and more stripping, and the audience experiences a quasi-erotic

arousal. Presumably, that is the hidden reason that women are not supposed to witness something so obscene, and why Dostoevsky has included the discussion of this question. In fact, he includes it twice, since Myshkin has already discussed it with the footman. Aglaia admits her intense curiosity, and Adelaida wants to end the discussion about women so as to hear more about the psychologically stripped man.

Extreme Exposure

When the underground man suffers the most extreme agonies of humiliation, he feels as if he has been skinned so that the very air touches him to the quick. It is a metaphor of extreme exposure.

The more private something is, the less it should be witnessed by others and, therefore, the greater the voyeuristic delight at seeing it. Watching another's suffering, still more his dying, involves the most extreme violation of privacy. That is so because in both we lose all ability to conceal anything about what is most intimate. What could be more so?

The thrill of such voyeurism suggests that human selfhood involves something that we feel to be uniquely our own, which cannot be made public if we are to remain ourselves. Animals have sex in the open, which, as we are aware, constitutes a key difference—perhaps the key difference—between them and us. We have “private parts,” they do not. Privacy virtually defines humanness, at least since the Fall. When Adam and Eve eat the apple, “the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7). They become recognizably human when they have something to hide.

To remain human, we must protect that difference from the animal at all costs. Humans who happen to witness dogs copulating in the street, horses in a field, or lions in a zoo are embarrassed before each other because the resemblance between what animals do and what we do calls attention to the very animality we must conceal. It suggests our fear at the possibility that anything nonanimal, anything that should be concealed, is an illusion. And we are embarrassed at our own embarrassment because it betrays the fear that, even more than our animality, we must conceal.⁴

⁴ The same applies to defecation and vomiting, when we cannot help

For each person, the private realm of self is unique, or there would be no reason to keep it private. *What we all share is the need to have something that we do not all share*, something that, for each person, belongs to him or her alone. Each of us is human because he is a unique person, a soul. Zombies fascinate us because they are people in all respects except that they have no soul. They raise the terrifying prospect that, as many materialists have contended, we are all zombies.

Human interest in watching others make love, suffer, or die testifies to the voyeuristic desire to witness what should not be witnessed, to trespass on the private realm that each person keeps sacred. In *The Republic*, Glaucon imagines that the value of the ring of Gyges, which confers invisibility, would lie in all the crimes and seductions one could commit without detection. But he overlooks the idea that the sheer act of eavesdropping on others' souls might be the greatest crime and offer the greatest thrill of all. The thrill of trespassing depends on our belief in a forbidden realm in others and therefore in ourselves. One way a person can affirm his or her own selfhood is to violate another's.

Voyeurism will everywhere and always violate the basic human taboo and yet, at the same time, affirm humanness.

The House of the Dead

How to conceal the private and exactly what constitutes voyeurism may differ from culture to culture, but the concept of impermissible seeing distinguishes not one culture from another but humanness itself—or so Dostoevsky's anthropology suggests. Lack of privacy threatens human identity, which is why Dostoevsky singles out the fact that he was not alone once for four years as a particularly awful part of his imprisonment. That is one reason prison is "the house of the dead," that is, of former people whose human life has been annulled. The need for something not shared by others, something uniquely one's own, also explains Dostoevsky's deep hostility to socialism.

Neither prison camps nor phalansteries offer private quarters.

displaying the internal as it becomes external. Externalization does not involve shame when, as with crying, it derives from recognizably spiritual sources. Defecation, vomiting, and dismemberment provoke disgust, for reasons described below.

Connoisseurs

Witnessing what is most private about another is morally prohibited because it violates selfhood. On the other hand, what violates selfhood affirms its existence, but in so doing it raises the possibility of selfhood's utter destruction. That possibility accounts for the fear, as well as the joy, of psychic espionage.

In his essay on teaching peasant children to write, Tolstoy describes the moment when Fedka discovers the joys of story-making:

He was excited for a long time, and could not sleep; and I cannot represent the feeling of excitement, of pleasure, of pain, and almost of remorse which I experienced in the course of that evening. I felt that from this time a new world of joys and sorrows had been revealed to Fedka—the world of art; it seemed to me that I was witnessing what no one has the right to see....⁵

Witnessing another's first act of story-making or love-making occasions excitement, pleasure, and pain because it means spying on a turning point in the life of a soul: this is the sort of thing that "no one has the right to see" and which therefore occasions remorse. The craving to see it constitutes the voyeuristic impulse. One wonders whether Anne Sullivan experienced such feelings at the moment Helen Keller realized that a particular movement of the fingers meant "water."

If Tolstoy could eavesdrop directly on Fedka's thoughts, the violation might be all the more profound, as would the ability to sense directly another's bodily sensations whenever one wished.⁶ Spying, overhearing, touching: it does not matter which sense we use to learn another's intimate secrets. Blind people can be voyeurs. Despite the etymology of the word, then, voyeurism is not really about seeing in the narrow sense of what we do with our eyes. It is about *knowing*.

To be human is to have secrets. Secret police exist so that there will be no secrets.

⁵ Lyof N. Tolstoi, *Who Should Learn Writing of Whom; Peasant Children of Us, or We of Peasant Children*, "The Long Exile," and *Other Stories* (New York: Scribner, 1929), 308.

⁶ Perhaps the special thrill or horror entailed by brain imaging reflects the suspicion that we are seeing not just brain but mind, and the portion of ourselves we would keep most private.

Whether we read another's diary, eavesdrop on his or her romantic conversations, or "touch on" hidden sensitivities, we become voyeurs because of what we have come to know. Perhaps we should have referred not to voyeurs but to connoisseurs, if that term had not already been appropriated for a different meaning.

The priest who hears confession, the doctor who learns about intimate ailments, the psychiatrist who hears our most private fears and desires: these professionals enjoy a special status, and sometimes wear a special uniform, because to perform their function they must acquire knowledge that would otherwise make them voyeurs. We trust them not only to keep the information secret from all others, but also to resist their own voyeuristic impulses. Perhaps one reason some religions insist that priests and monks be celibate is that sinners do not want their confessors to be aroused when hearing of fleshly sins. Those whom we trust with intimate secrets must not be curious in the wrong way. And we, too, must regard our encounters with them as essentially different from other encounters, which is why it can be so unsettling to come across one's psychiatrist showering at the gym.

Room 101

In 1984, the telescreen ensures that no inch of space and no moment of time escape scrutiny. Even when Winston and Julia imagine they have found their own time and place—the real joy of their love lies in its privacy—that very impression is part of Big Brother's trap. The point of O'Brien's torture encounter with Winston is not to punish him but to violate self and soul so profoundly that Winston truly loves everything that has taken them away. Thus the novel ends with Winston's horrible appreciation of how he has finally lost his self:

He gazed up at the enormous face [of Big Brother]. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast!... But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother. (1984, 245)

The struggle was *self*-willed and he wins the victory over *himself*: it is selfhood that is lost.

In Zamyatin's *We*, the horror of the houses with glass walls is not that one can hide nothing, but that there is nothing to hide. But

the horror of *1984* is still greater. Big Brother does not create a world without souls. On the contrary, he ensures that there will always be people with souls because the goal of the regime is not social engineering but precisely the violation of souls. The world we are creating, O'Brien explains, "is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined." It will grow "not less but more merciless," and progress will be "progress toward more pain." The emotions it will foster are fear and "self-abasement"; and for there to be self-abasement there must be selves (1984, 220).

Winston has been lured into rebellion and self-cultivation so that his self can be violated all the more painfully. His very dreams have been spied upon. The ultimate torture of "Room 101"—which is "the worst thing in the world"—differs from person to person. It is whatever each person, in the depth of his soul, most dreads. It affirms individuality by violating it.

This violation takes place in the sight of a torturer who experiences "the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever" (1984, 220). Someone will always be present to inflict the self-destroying pain and to witness it. In the world of Big Brother, voyeurism and espionage are not means to an end, they are an end. That is the hidden meaning of the phrase Winston has always known: Big Brother is Watching You.

We too often overlook the fact that *1984* is about voyeurism.

3 / Laughter and Disgust

We have seen that as voyeurism involves identification, it implicitly affirms the existence of self. If we really thought of ourselves as entirely material, as no different from animals, and as having nothing resembling a "soul," voyeurism would lose its point.

We have also seen that in identification, one draws close to the other so as to witness and vicariously experience his or her selfhood, and then withdraws to a safe distance.

But voyeurism can take the opposite route if it involves our other reaction to the suffering of others: disgust. When disgusted, we first recoil, and then, fascinated by what we have seen and our own reaction to it, we may then draw close to examine these two

sources of fascination. Disgust, too, contains implicit philosophical content.

Atness

Theorists have often noticed that disgust is closely related to laughter. In his well-known study of disgust, Winfried Menninghaus even declares that “all theorists of disgust are, at the same time, theorists of laughter.”⁷

The connection often noted is that laughter and disgust each distance one from an object. I like to say that they both partake of “atness”: we feel disgust *at* something whereas hatred is hatred *of* something. One is more intimately involved with what provokes hatred than with what provokes laughter or disgust. On the positive side, wonder also displays atness.

Nevertheless, most things that are funny are not disgusting, and vice versa. Disgust seems to involve a sense of the threatening, whereas laughter, as Bakhtin famously observed, abolishes fear. To be sure, the same things may be both disgusting and funny, as in Rabelais, Swift, or the humor of twelve-year-old boys. But we have here the sort of phenomenon Hume discusses in relation to tragedy: two opposite emotions intensify each other precisely because they do not fuse but remain distinct.⁸ That could not happen if they were somehow versions of the same thing.

Laughter and disgust share an important feature. Nothing in inanimate nature can be either funny or disgusting. The Grand Canyon

⁷ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 10. See also Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2004); William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸ For Hume, in tragedy the beauty of the oratory and the genius of representing horror create a situation in which “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 with the delight which the eloquence raises in us.” David Hume, “Of Tragedy,” in *English Prose and Poetry, 1660-1800: A Selection*, ed. Frank Brady and Martin Price (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1961), 243.

may be sublime and an erupting volcano threatening, but neither is funny or disgusting. One may make them funny or disgusting only by seeing them as metaphors, let us say, for parts of the human body, but then it is the human that proves essential. In between the human and inanimate lies the world of animals, where disgust but not humor easily arises. The rotting body of a dog may nauseate, but animals can only be funny if we choose to see them in human terms.

The ridiculous and what Menninghaus amusingly calls the vomitive both involve physiological responses: we smile or laugh, become nauseated or vomit. Fear by its nature also seems to involve physiological responses, as hatred does not. In all three cases, fear, laughter, and disgust, the physiological response is involuntary or, rather, faster than voluntary control. Good speakers may get a hostile audience to laugh at something that, given their beliefs, they should not find funny. The undeniable physiological fact of their laughter indicates that they acknowledge contrary evidence they would rather abjure.

Laughter

According to Henri Bergson, we laugh when we recognize that the immaterial soul has ceded control to the purely material or to the body acting on its own. The failure of attentiveness, flexibility, and vitality reveals the mechanical, automatic, and purely physical. "The soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates; the immateriality which thus passes into matter is what is called gracefulness. Matter, however, is obstinate and resists. It draws to itself the ever-alert activity of this higher principle, would fain convert it to its own inertia and cause it to revert to mere automatism."⁹ Such reversion constitutes the humorous.

We intuitively try to imagine that we are minds in control of our selves, but the body often operates by its own inertia: "The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (Bergson, 79). Moreover, the mind itself sometimes displays an unthinking

⁹ Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy: "An Essay on Comedy" [by] George Meredith, "Laughter" [by] Henri Bergson*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 78.

momentum and is even funnier than the body when it, too, acts like a machine operating outside our will. That is one reason that Freudian slips can be funny: a mechanism independent of our conscious wills eludes its control and reveals what we would rather conceal.

As we intellectuals ought to know, absentmindedness is inherently funny. As we intellectuals ought to know, absentmindedness is inherently funny. Or consider Orwell's example of a mixed metaphor in a Communist pamphlet: "the fascist octopus has sung its swan song."¹⁰ The two metaphors seem to be strung together by rules acting mechanically on their own, since no one really paying attention could have produced the absurdity of an octopus singing.

The history of comedy might almost be described as the history of representing the seven deadly sins plus the one that attempts to conceal the others, hypocrisy, each of which seem to operate on its own. Bergson's theory explains why it is much easier to make a comedy out of the more bodily sins—gluttony, greed, and lust—than of the more spiritual ones: wrath, envy, and pride. The greatest comedies deal with highly self-conscious vices, such as pride and hypocrisy, because it is harder to show self-consciousness escaping conscious control. For similar reasons, comedies about slothfulness are rare: how does one show non-action operating on its own? That is why *Oblomov* is such an achievement.

Bergson likes to cite Pascal, who is anything but a comic writer, and I think the reason is that both have a keen dualistic sense of the mind entombed in a body. They also sense consciousness entombed in a mental world that often acts like a body because it operates by habit. For Pascal, full consciousness is the rarest and most wonderful thing in the world—wonderful in the root sense of exciting wonder that somehow it could exist at all and that it could then be tethered to physical and mental flesh.

Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to

¹⁰ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Collected Essays and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 4: *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 134. Orwell observes: when images clash like this "it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming; in other words, he is not really thinking."

destroy him. A vapor, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But if the universe were to destroy him, man would still be more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies.... The universe knows nothing of this.¹¹

Overlook the wonder of consciousness imprisoned and become ridiculous. Appreciate it and discover the essence of the comic in life.

Tolstoy captured the very essence of comedy when he described Pierre's reaction to having been imprisoned in a hut. All of a sudden Pierre bursts into laughter:

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Pierre. And he said aloud to himself: "The soldier did not let me pass. They took me and shut me up. They held me captive. Who is 'me'?... Me? Me—is my immortal soul! Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!..." and he laughed till the tears came to his eyes.

... High overhead in the luminous sky hung the full moon.... And farther still, beyond these fields and forests, was the bright shimmering horizon luring one on to infinity. Pierre contemplated the heavens, and the remote, receding glimmering stars.

"And all that is mine, all that is within me, and is me!" he thought. "And they caught all that and put it in a shed and barricaded it with planks!" (W&P, 1217)

Disgust

My idea is this: Comedy is by its nature Platonic and dualistic, but when we experience disgust we implicitly endorse an Aristotelian philosophy.

Aristotle's doctrine of forms and the soul is not dualistic. For Aristotle, form is inseparable from matter, because it inheres in matter and gives it shape. Form does not exist on its own, any more than there can be color or shape without a thing that is colored or shaped. Believing in the independence of forms, as Plato did, is like supposing that because we can mentally abstract the properties of color, somewhere, in absolute purity, color must exist by itself.

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Kailsheimer (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 95. Translation amended.

For Aristotle, soul shapes the matter of living things. Psyche is Aristotle's term for the form of a living object, and psychology is the study of the formal factor that makes a living object what it is.¹² Psyche is therefore not separable from body. More accurately, form (or soul) is a shaping power, an entelechy, that is in the process of shaping matter. Thus, in nutrition (performed by the "digestive" soul), food becomes assimilated into flesh. Living involves not just form but also forming.

We can arrive at a good first approximation of the nature of disgust if we say that it constitutes our reaction to *the failure of soul* in the Aristotelian sense. We experience disgust when living matter escapes the shaping power of form, when soul weakens and so leaves relatively unformed organic being. Bodies disintegrate and rot, disease deforms, parasites invade, processes normally kept private or internal are exposed to view: all these disgusting events testify to the failure of Aristotelian soul.

That is one reason Rembrandt's famous dissection painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Joan*, is especially nauseating. It shows the corpse of a man just dead whose viscera have been removed and whose brain is being carefully taken apart (the outer membrane has just been removed). The face stares blankly at us, as if to remind us that ever so recently it bore witness to a soul governing itself and the rest of the body. Form still lingers, or else there would be no point in the dissection. Form taken apart before it falls apart; that is what this painting portrays.

I therefore believe Martha Nussbaum is incorrect when she says that we experience disgust at our own animality and materiality, a conclusion that seems driven by her political and social agenda. It is not human materiality but the failure of form to govern materiality that disgusts. After all, the very materiality of beautiful, erotic bodies attracts us. Marilyn Monroe's flesh was not perceived as disgusting. Each period's ideal of beauty expresses a different conception of how form should govern matter.

Nussbaum wants to reject disgust as the basis for any social policy because disgust, in her view, reflects a Platonic dualism that rejects body. Such dualism, she believes, is false, and leads to what she calls "shady social practice, in which the discomfort people feel over the

¹² I paraphrase the paraphrase of W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 196.

fact of having an animal body is projected outwards onto vulnerable people and groups" (Nussbaum, *Hiding*, 74). But disgust is not Platonic but Aristotelian. What disgusts is not body *per se*, but body that escapes from shape, form, and soul.

Rot and Skin

While laughter betrays the mind's unsure relation to the body and the body-like qualities of the mind itself, disgust is about the mind-like qualities of body. It is about the shaping power inherent in an organic being that makes it what it is and allows its processes to go on as they should.

If so, we should expect that what we find most disgusting is what is most like us and yet has lost shaping power: the rotting human corpse. In the literature of disgust, the rotting corpse does play the role of exemplar. By contrast, "the body beautiful" displays form perfectly shaping matter with nothing left over, or with perhaps one small exception, like a tiny mole, that all the more forcefully reminds us of the forming power operative elsewhere.

Ovid tells the story of Apollo, who himself symbolizes perfect form, stripping the skin of Marsyas, who had challenged him to a flute contest and lost.

And as he cried the skin cracked from his body
In one wound, blood streaming over muscles,
Veins stripped naked, pulse beating; entrails could be
Counted as they moved, even the heart shone red
Within the breast (cited in Menninghaus, 79).

Stripped skin turns the body into a mass of biological processes no longer held together by any guiding force: skin, which holds together physically, stands in for soul, which holds together processually. To lose one's skin is to lose one's soul, and Marsyas screams, "Why are you tearing me from myself?" (Menninghaus, 79).

Table Manners

In Brobdingnag, Gulliver has trouble eating the most delectable food because he can see flies, as large as larks, "alight upon my victuals, and leave their loathsome excrement or spawn behind, which to me was very visible, though not to the natives of that country" (GT, 314-5).

Gulliver is also disgusted at how the gracious queen eats, “which was for some time a very nauseous sight. She would craunch the wing of a lark, bones and all, between her teeth, although it were nine times as large as that of a full-grown turkey” (GT, 311).

Norbert Elias famously argues that the history of table manners shows a gradual attempt to distance one’s self from the sheer animality of eating: over time, people develop codes that forbid the diner to touch his anus, blow his nose, or put dirty hands into communally shared dishes.¹³ People gradually learned to prepare food so that it becomes symbolically transformed, not mere animal flesh but veal marsala, or as English allows us to say, not pig but pork. We move from hands to a knife to elaborate silverware, or in the Far East to chopsticks, which dictate that food be cut into very small pieces as unbestial as possible.

In Aristotle’s terms, it is as if the cooking and serving of food already began the process of the soul’s assimilation of matter into form, which is why in some cultures (and for some people) food is supposed to remind the consumer of the animal as little as possible. Many find internal organs, from the brain to the kidney, disgusting, and some extend this disgust to meat on the bone or with the skin. Vegetarianism may arise not only from humaneness but also from disgust. A roast pig with the head visible or the dish the French call *tête de veau* is either disgusting or a delicacy, for “delicacy” often means that the diner has the high culture to see the work of artistic preparation where others cannot. Only a barbarian or a connoisseur (in the usual sense) would eat brains.

Mind Has Fled

In Bruges I saw Gerard David’s two-paneled painting entitled “The Judgment of Cambyzes,” which was based on a story in Herodotus and commissioned for the Bruges town hall. The first panel shows in the background an official taking a bribe, and in the foreground his arrest. In the second panel’s gruesome foreground, we see the punishment: he is, like Marsyas, having his skin slowly stripped from his body. In the background, his son has inherited his father’s post but as a reminder against corruption must always display his father’s skin.

¹³ See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 45-182.

What is truly awful about this painting is not so much the stripping of the skin but the expression of the man's face, which does *not* show pain, suffering, or despair. Those horrors have evidently already been endured, and so we see what succeeds them: a complete mental absence. The still-living man's mind has departed along with his Aristotelian soul, which has died while the man's organs still function by sheer inertia. This is truly a living corpse (*zhivoi trup*) with a dead soul (*mertvaya dusha*).

Something quite similar appears in Titian's painting of the flaying of Marsyas, which is much more horrible than the story as Ovid tells it. Apollo is delicately stripping skin from Marsyas's body, which is hanging upside down, while a little lapdog incongruously licks up blood from the ground. The dog's meal hints at the digestive soul, which presumably Marsyas still has.

What is worst of all is that Marsyas no longer appears to be suffering. He is beyond suffering because he is now a still living body from which the mind—the higher sort of soul that for Aristotle differentiates us as human—is now absent. Various figures of different species, humanoid and animal, look on in voyeuristic curiosity, evidently fascinated by the repulsive scene.

Here again we have before us the ultimate mystery of soul. The Aristotelian understanding of soul, dramatized by stripping, can also generate fascinating disgust. What does the complete absence of mind show about our humanness?

Dostoevsky and Holbein's "Christ in the Tomb"

Horribly enough, David's and Titian's paintings convey the sense that soul cannot transcend body. The paintings embody a conception the very opposite of one Dostoevsky admired, which was of saints who could laugh with contempt at the torturers burning them alive.

Now consider the Holbein painting of "Christ in the Tomb" that, in *The Idiot*, so fascinates Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Ippolit. All three agree that it is a painting that could make one lose one's faith. Why? The answer cannot be simply that it shows Christ's suffering, because, as Ippolit notes, it has been Church doctrine since the earliest ages that "Christ's suffering was not symbolical but actual, and that his body was therefore completely subject to the laws of nature" (I, 388). Portraying Christ's suffering should endorse, not shake, faith.

The problem, I think, lies not with the suffering itself, but with what has happened as a result of the suffering. Jesus's face has the same horrifying blankness as the official in David's painting. Ippolit notes that artists typically paint Christ with extraordinary beauty of face in spite of the agonies he suffers. But in this face "there is no trace of beauty. It is in every detail the corpse of a man who has been wounded, tortured, beaten by the guards and the people ... and after that has undergone the agony of crucifixion, lasting for six hours at least." In that face one sees that "the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a deathly glassy light" (I, 388). *No one is there.*

The horror of the painting is that the soul, or rather the part of it that makes one human, has evidently disintegrated before death. Only the lowest part of the animal soul—sensitivity—remains, while the higher soul that makes one human has departed. If this is how it was with the Savior, then we cannot credit a dualistic model in which Christ gives up the ghost, saying, "it is finished": by then, his soul was already dead. Therefore it cannot have left his body at death, harrowed hell for three days, and then returned to his body to rise again.

This painting is not Platonic, but Aristotelian: the soul subsides in the body, in the form of the body; and as the body loses form, it loses soul. Soul cannot exist outside the body and can be destroyed piecemeal even before the body. That is why it is hard to accept that anyone seeing the dead Jesus like that could believe that He would rise again. Ippolit asks: "If the Teacher could have seen Himself on the eve of the crucifixion, would He have gone up to the cross and died as He did?" (I, 389).

When the shaping form, the human image, is lost, so is the soul. Faith can survive agony much more easily than it can survive disgust. I think that is why, immediately after his description of the painting, Ippolit formulates his question in terms of image and imagelessness: "Is it possible to perceive as an image that which has no image?" Can the one who has lost his soul still have a soul to rise?

* * *

We watch dramas, see paintings, and read literary works that raise ultimate questions about the soul with voyeuristic curiosity. Sometimes they invite us to identify, and then we can easily be horrified that the soul can be so violated. At other times, they provoke disgust, which suggests that the soul might no longer be there at all. Which is more horrifying, or more fascinating, it is hard to say.