

Charming An Upside-Down Brown Snake

- Justin Clemens

Shit is primordial magic. To eat is also magic, but a different kind. To eat is to incorporate parts of the other, to transform it internally into energy for living — and then to excrete what remains of that part of the parts of the other that cannot be incorporated. But the other doesn't usually look afterwards the same as when it went in. You've transformed it, naturally, involuntarily, although not into an elevated spiritual substance — a thought, an artwork, an invention — but into something utterly unpalatable. Shit is real, it's the real thing, it's real because it's what's left of what your body cannot deal with at all. Shit is the irrefragable by-product of life. To live is to shit.

Unlike eating, which perhaps isn't always a political act — for you can simply be ingesting the other in a prepolitical agon — shitting is always political, at least for human beings. Here's this thing that comes from the inside of your body, that isn't your body, that can't stay part of your body, and which you can't properly live with when it's outside your body. Something has to be done to it. You can't just leave it alone, let it be. You must not wallow in your shit. Shit has to be monitored, treated, spirited away. Shit is, to use a favourite word of the Bulgarian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the epitome of abjection. Even when it's a well-formed turd — and that's not always on the cards — it's not a good form at all.

From the moment you're born, your carers are tending to your shit, worrying about it, its frequency, consistency, its locale, its disposal. If they're not, well, then, you're being abused, which — if you survive — will have its own horrific psychic consequences, to say the least. If they are, then they're paying inordinate amounts of attention to your nether regions, to your anus and its movements. Unlike the mouth, into which food must go and out of which cries and, sometimes, spew come, the anus is a one-way portal from the inside to the outside. Or at least it ought to be. Both mouth and anus have to be clean, kept clean, taught to be kept clean. But the mouth is part of your face, the most public of places for human beings: open, even when closed. The anus is private, perhaps the most private of all our orifices: closed, even when open. You need to be taught this to live in society, to keep your anus and its products hidden,

somehow essential to your body yet not an admissible part of it. Enormous, nay heroic, efforts are dedicated to the potty-training of infants. Wipe your arse, wipe it properly, shit here and not there, sneak off and do it alone, all alone in a special little room, with your shame and your smell, and then flush it away and wash your hands, wash them clean of the stench and the contagion.

Let's face it, your body-image cannot not retain traces of this intense and intrusive pedagogical process. No wonder so many people still have nightmares in which they're drowning in shit, or so many diverse and wonderful commodities continue to target the anuses of world-citizens. Of course, we all know shit is absolutely natural too, something that we don't have to be ashamed about because, after all, we all do it, don't we? Man or woman, adult or child, the anus and its habits are something we all share. But that's a mixed message if I ever heard one: treat something as if it's shameful, then assure everybody that it's not. Not that there's any way around this bind. Society itself is the locale of mixed messages, many of which can't be clarified, untangled or reduced without the whole thing ceasing to work at all.

In fact, it's tempting to say that shit is the primal magical substance of all political life, a divisive and dissimulating bond that entangles your involuntary biophysical functions, your anus, your parents, plumbing and politics in an unimaginably complex web of anxiety and shame, injunction and submission, denial and acceptance, cleanliness and godliness, education and engineering. Think of all the idioms that surround excrement and excretion: 'They treated me like shit,' 'She thinks her shit doesn't stink,' 'He's a piece of shit,' 'You're shitting me,' 'She kicked the shit out of him,' 'I was shitting myself,' 'The guy's a shit-eater,' 'Shit happens,' and so on. Note how each circulates around sadism, humiliation, exclusion, worthlessness, treachery, violence, terror, contempt and disaster. So much of politics and political economy is waste-management, whose paradigm is the repetitive wiping-away of a natural process of the body, and so many of the practices we enthusiastically participate in return — as if by an occult and unconscious mechanism — to the base reality of getting

rid of shit. Even the careless, thoughtless, quotidian invocation of such practices is seething with prohibitions and transgressions of all kinds.

But that's also why shit is a magical substance. Everybody's worried about it, can't not worry about it. But don't get too uptight about it, you might become constipated. We all know that shit is going to come back; better than that it come back as something else. Hence the origins of the classic psychic equation, as much a staple of anal eroticism as of staid accountancy: money = shit. As Dominique Laporte puts it in his classic *History of Shit*: 'Once eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold.' But this isn't a stable conversion process. Ancient German fairy stories were clear on the matter. Dupes would wake the next day to find that the gold with which the Devil had paid for their services had transmuted into shit.

The reversible archaic alchemy of shit and shitting squats in our own prehistory, not to mention the history of our civilisations, founding our bodies and our body politic. The clenching-unclenching rim or ring of the anus is the portal through which a dark occultism enters the worlds of humans, passing from the unimaginable deep history of our phylogenetic inheritance, digestive operations and civil education into the power struggles of the present. The dance of life is a dance of shit — and it couldn't be any other way.