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"Eat Shit and Die!" Rereading power dynamics in fictional depictions of coprophagia

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In a 2010 online video interview, the pornographic actor Veronika Moser discusses her longstanding interest in 'scat' fetishism (sex acts involving faeces), in particular her "passion" for consuming the excrement of her lovers and fellow actors. Introducing her preferences, she discusses how "[her] main objective was to learn to swallow shit, because that's something very special" (Moser). Indeed, the very excess of the act appears to form a large part of its appeal to Moser - she eventually justifies herself by claiming that "for me there's no extremer act" (Moser). Many of those commenting on the video appear to share a belief in the distinct, "special" quality of the fetish, whilst condemning the practice itself. Such a reaction is to be expected. Coprophagia - the term which describes Moser's fetish for consuming excrement - has long been a deeply controversial and potentially unsettling act, tied up in a series of debates about power and sexuality.

The revulsion of the commentators is arguably understandable from a social-biological perspective, whereby consuming faeces is thought to lead to discomfort, illness – and ultimately – death. However, as Barbara Ehrenreich argues, revulsion towards excrement is a learned trait not inherent to human behaviour (93). Indeed, coprophilia, a more general sexual interest in faeces, may lack the "special" quality afforded to specifically coprophagic acts. The division between a general, coprophilic interest and a specific, coprophagic interest becomes particularly resonant in certain literary and theoretical discourses. Especially notable is a hesitancy in depicting the act of coprophagia, a theme which can be traced through several different texts. Whilst the avowed fetishism of Veronika Moser serves as a 'positive' example of mutual agreement, those texts which deliver the reader to the cusp of coprophagia often depend upon a 'negative' model where a lack of mutual understanding emerges as the principal subject. In its most extreme form, this essay will argue, this negative model may involve attempting to coerce coprophagia into a framework of vengeance.

This essay will use the moment of coprophagic unrepresentability introduced in the writings of the Marquis de Sade to discuss similar moments in two later novels by British writers: Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting and Howard Jacobson's Redback. This paper will seek to show how ideas of power, both in terms of narrative and character, are deepened and complicated by questions of unrepresentability raised by the simulation of coprophagia. It will question whether coprophagia raises issues of representation in general – and if so, how including it may alter the text in which it is located. This approach will focus more on the mechanics of individual texts rather than attempt a comparative reading, though such a reading may seem tempting; thematic connections aside, the texts discussed later in this essay are linked by their being broadly contemporaneous, and written by men geographically proximate to one another. These coincidences are intriguing, but will remain unexplored. Furthermore, the focus on the 'how' of depicting coprophagia may neglect the 'why', and as a result this essay is consciously incomplete; whilst incongruities in theoretical approaches influence the decision to form a narrative-focused approach to the texts discussed, a full analysis of the topic would involve a deeper analysis of previous theoretical and literary examinations of coprophagia. Presented as a series of close readings, this essay aims to function as notes towards a more comprehensive analysis of a deeply complex topic.

Caveats aside, there is a body of work which influences much writing on the subject. The majority of existing studies of coprophagia draw upon either insights into non-human societies, or into the human unconscious through psychoanalytic practice. Psychoanalytic interest in coprophagia stems from a more general coprophilic interest which can be traced back to the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud's work on infantile sexuality, for example, depicts the release and withholding of faeces as a stage in children's sexual development which may lay the basis for aspects of personality developed later in life. Later feminist commentators on Freud have taken his ideas further, often using coprophilic aspects of Freud's theories in order to highlight flaws and inadequacies in the theories themselves. Moreover, the adoption of such strategies often involves a reconsideration of the writings of the Marquis de Sade, a writer who frequently employs coprophilic themes in his work.

For example, writing on the work of Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop discusses a moment whereby an example of sexual peculiarity in Sade allows Irigaray to discuss "the same exclusion in psychoanalytic theory" (Gallop 84). The Sadeian scene involves a man who asks his wife to "suck his cock while shitting in his mouth" each morning, unless she happens to be menstruating (83). Highlighting a difference between bodily fluids and "the turd, solid and countable like money", Irigaray is depicted as arguing that "the Sadian libertine, like Freud, [is] trapped in an anal-phallic phase" (84). Such a direct confluence between text and theory is complicated by the explicitness of the passage, its willingness, in Irigaray's words, to "exhibit, without shame, the phallocracy reigning everywhere" (85).

Employing a similarly subversive strategy, in *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva introduces her concept of the abject, an aspect of psychoanalytic inquiry depicted as logically antecedent to Freudian notions of the unconscious, through "the repugnance, the retching that... turns me away from sewage, defilement and muck" (2). Kristeva includes faeces alongside corpses as that which exposes the "border of my condition as a human being" (3). Later, having described the abject itself, Kristeva examines it in the context of a range of works of literature which, she argues, employ different strategies of abjection. Discussing Proust, Kristeva argues that the archetypal orgy scene in works by the Marquis de Sade "had nothing abject about it", explaining that: "everything is nameable for it, the whole is nameable. Sade's scene integrates: it allows for no other, no unthinkable, nothing heterogeneous. Rational and optimistic, it does not exclude" (21).

The contrast between Proust and de Sade, writers described as employing an abject and a non-abject perspective respectively, is vivid, but Kristeva's conclusions are open to debate. Bringing the abject (with its associations of death and liminality) to the foreground, a coprophagic scene such as the one described by Irigaray sits uneasily on the cusp of abjection by questioning the borders of bodily and social systems in a manner that Kristeva describes as the being at the root of abjection itself. Although, superficially, the abject quality of "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4) lends de Sade's work its unique character, Kristeva highlights the contrast with the deliberately mechanistic narrative style of Sade. However, a relentless emphasis on naming does not mean that Sade refuses to exclude anything; it may even highlight the incongruity of moments in Sade's texts when a narrative explicitly remains unfinished, unintegrated and unnamed. Similarly, the use of Sade to form a critique of the phallocentrism of psychoanalysis, as described in Gallop's text, suggests the creation of a new sexual economy which can transcend the limitations inherent to both Sade and Freud: yet coprophagia in Sade is complicated by its depictions in texts such as 120 Days of Sodom, which suggest both a greater level of complicity and uncertainty than either Kristeva or Irigaray seem willing to admit. Such developments may enable a move away from such psychoanalytic perspectives in favour of a more narrative-focused analysis.

The work of the Marquis de Sade is crucial to this. The eleventh day (or chapter) of Sade's 120 Days of Sodom principally concerns itself with coprophilia, recounting a series of incidents in which fecal matter plays an increasingly prominent role in sexual activity. The chapter graphically describes encounters that slowly familiarise the reader with the sexual inclinations of the customers of Duclos, the prostitute whose narrative dominates this section of the book.

The chapter generally follows the mechanistic format described by Kristeva, the narrative following a pattern in which coprophilia serves to hasten the male orgasm, at which point the narrator starts describing a different set of proclivities. Despite this, the chapter is striking in that it reflects a simultaneous urge to divulge and withhold information - creating two narrative absences that afford the text an aura of mystery. During the first absence, a narrative gap occurs where the reader may expect an explanation of a monk's activities after coprophilic foreplay. The missing of these details is justified both in terms of narrative consistency and social deference – eventually reserved for a later storyteller, Madame Martaine. The second absence follows an extended description of coprophilia, whose explicit gendering and sexual intent (Duclos tending to introduce excrement into sex games at the same time as she masturbates her clients), seems to imply a close relationship between the active partners in coprophilic sex. Even in a scene where a character is smeared in excrement by Duclos, it is implied that the participant knows where it supposedly originates from, and that the appeal of coprophilia lies partly in this knowledge - for the majority of characters engaging in coprophilia, some connection between the giver and receiver of the excrement is maintained.

The urge to divulge reaches its limit in a moment of unrepresentability when coprophagia should, in narrative terms, become most blatant; previously, coprophagia was only simulated, with even the most lurid character "spit[ting] out... dingy water" (386) soon after ingestion. The chapter's final anecdote, however, is from a character who requests "four turds" in a pot beneath a pierced chair, which upon receiving he would shut himself alone in a room. When the character leaves this

room, "the pot was discovered perfectly empty", prompting a discussion amongst those hearing the tale as to the fate of the missing excrement. Significantly, the character "never made the least enquiry about [the turds'] origins", and seems nonplussed at the suggestion that they were taken from "persons suffering from syphilis" (387). At the point in the narrative where coprophagia seems the natural narrative progression, it is unclear whether it happens at all. The character, and perhaps Sade himself thus take ultimate interpretative power when it comes to the coprophagic act, obscuring both the motivations and actions of the character concerned. Given that the chapter portrays an increasingly graphic range of coprophilic fantasies, and assuming that coprophagia has a "special" quality that would make it a suitable denounement of the chapter, the move towards debate and uncertainty affords a certain teasing, playful quality to Sade's writing.

Coprophagia represents the nexus of many thematic concerns; the chapter moves increasingly away from the sexual act itself, reaching a point where the link between the humans involved in the coprophagic act becomes largely opaque. Sade's playful approach to depicting coprophagia reflects a similar strategy in depicting the power dynamic of a prostitute-client relationship – depicted in terms of narrative, rather than political, power. De Sade thus not only explores questions of sexual power, but also colludes with different levels of narrative control; even on a more general level, the confessions of the prostitute Duclos act as a sub-narrative which reveals and subverts the power relationships of the novel as a whole.

Sade's playfulness is thus contingent on a model of complicity – there is little sign of coercion this early in the text. This idyllic display of coprophilic indulgence is shattered by a character that refuses to display at all – whilst Sade's general style may not condone such opacity, its effect upon the narrative is powerful. There is little suggestion of malice in the would-be coprophagist's silence, yet it nonetheless functions as a destabilising narrative act. The first absence, being bound to recognisable and mutually agreed referents, is accepted - its only real purpose being to serve as a precursor to the more violent narrative absence. In order to translate such absences into the language of revenge, as Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting and Howard Jacobson's Redback do, narrative violence is obliged to engage with more vivid forms of retribution. As such, the novels use coprophagia (and coprophagic language) in order to stage power conflicts in which central narrators and characters are shown to lack the kind of abrupt narrative influence seen in Sade's text. For the critic, much like the characters in 120 Days of Sodom, coprophagia proves as elusive as it does potentially powerful.

Coprophagic language has long held a close association with revenge – visible, for example, in the many informal slang terms which project a relationship of unwanted subservience by using coprophagia as a metaphor. Some texts, however, seek to make the implication more direct. In 3D Realms' 1996 videogame Duke Nukem 3D, the titular protagonist combats his enemies with both physical and verbal violence, seeking revenge on alien invaders for kidnapping human women. For Duke Nukem, coprophagia is one of the ultimate symbols of an aggressively masculine power dynamic; upon defeating lesser enemies, Duke often taunts his enemies with the familiar slang insult "eat shit and die!". Later in the game, Duke encounters one of the game's most difficult ('boss')

enemies, to whom he boasts "I'm gonna rip your head off and shit down your neck" - and in the short video clip which accompanies the enemy's death, Duke is shown doing just that. This coprophagic rhetoric of domination depicts a simple power relationship; forcing another human to eat faeces becomes a symbol of ultimate power, projecting a straightforward relationship of subservience. As seen in Sade, this power dynamic can be usurped by the explicit detachment of the giver and receiver of excrement. For Duke, coprophagic power comes at the moment of murderous conquest - yet not all texts share the same conclusions as to the power of coprophagia to indicate conquest. As is seen in Irvine Welsh's novel Trainspotting, the moment of coprophagic conquest may be subject to broader power dynamics which re-encode it as a futile act of protest.

Shit plays a pivotal role in *Trainspotting*, often functioning as a symbol of the peripheral, drug-dependent lifestyles lead by Mark Renton and his friends. In an early scene in the novel, for example, Renton searches frantically to find an opium suppository which he has accidentally expelled during defecation in a shop toilet. Reflecting a cultural bias towards seeing 'shite' as a byword for 'bad', excrement becomes symbolic of Renton's general search for drug-induced highs, a link made evident by his staring at his "scabby and occasionally weeping track marks" (25) prior to searching the toilet bowl. The search itself involves "the panhandling of the shite ay many good Muirhoose and Pilton punters" (26). The use of 'good' is significant; not only good in the sense of their bringing business to the shop, but as an implicit contrast to the 'bad' lifestyle of Renton – at least in terms of the conventional, acquisitive morality that Renton explicitly rejects. Renton's being 'bad' is reinforced by the nearby presence of the word 'shite', developing the associations made earlier in the passage.

For all the novel's avowed coprophilia, it is arguably the explicitly coprophagic idiom which marks the novel's most telling interest in excrement. Images of proto-coprophagic acts of debasement become a kind of code through which Renton describes subservience to various power dynamics. Upon meeting a dealer who insists on prolonging his wait for drugs, Renton notes that his ability to hurry the transaction is constrained by his increasing desperation, stating that "Ah'd walk oan ma hands and knees to use the cunt's shite as toothpaste and we baith know it" (20). A broader power dynamic is introduced in similar fashion later in the text, when a character denounces nationalism, defining Scots as those who would "throttle the life oot ay each other fir the privilege ay rimmin some English aristocrat's piles" (228). The proto-coprophagic act is de-sexualised, recreated as a masculine metaphor of domination which affirms the difference between characters in the text and those who wield 'true' power - Trainspotting thus attempts to explore the narrative effects of coprophagia by detaching it from sexuality and subsuming it into a broader metaphor of power. That the dealer temporarily loses his influence on Renton after giving him drugs, and that Renton detaches himself from servile nationalism in order to denounce that of others, again suggests that the relationship between the giver and receiver of the excrement in a coprophagic relationship is obscured and complicated by narrative competitiveness, transferable to whomever controls the narrative in which coprophagia is being discussed.

A brief chapter near the end of the book ('Eating Out') puts this idea in its clearest terms; it also represents the only moment in the text where a character actively (albeit unknowingly) consumes faeces. In the chapter, a harassed Edinburgh waitress poisons the food of a group of boorish English customers with various bodily excretions. The poisoning itself is methodical and obeys a similar rule of narrative intensification to that seen in de Sade - but with an entirely different purpose. The moment of unrepresentability that sees the coprophagic act become the final 'missing step' in Sade's text is subverted by a different narrative sequence, where the coprophagic act is part of a sequence that leads from menstrual blood to urine, introducing shit as a precursor to the final step, rat poison. Coprophagia loses its intensity by becoming part of a litany of disgust, whose progression is determined by the increasing associations of illness and violent revenge - even the transition from menstrual blood to urine involves a description of the character's cystitis, introducing the idea of illness proper. The move to rat poison, though superficially distinctive, may seem a more logical step when one considers the uses of coprophilic language established earlier in the text. Throughout the novel, excrement symbolises degradation: the constant use of the word "shite" as an expression of The poisoning develops a meaning already implied, an ultimate disdain continues the trend. extension of the degradation and submission associated with faeces. Consuming excrement may thus become part of a rhetoric of absolute submission, tempered only by a possibility of narrative playfulness similar to that employed in Sade's text.

The waitress' 'revenge' is obtained by placing the bodily items in conveniently similar food items; tomato soup, white wine, chocolate sauce and ice-cream respectively. As such, the passage recalls an earlier scene in the novel, where a character attempting to smuggle befouled bedsheets out of his lover's house is foiled by the polite insistences of her mother. The resultant unfurling sees faecal matter fly into the father's food, where it looks "like he had made a mess with watery chip shop sauce" (94). The horror of faeces and food being confused is mirrored in the later passage, where the waitress notes that the shit-poisoned chocolate sauce "looks good enough tae eat" (305). Significance lies not only in the shock of the similarity, but in the fact that coprophagia is hidden and subsumed by the association. The "small runny turd" that forms part of the waitress' revenge is thus, like the unwanted "chip sauce sauce", immediately hidden and consumed out of the reader's sight (304). The novel expands on this earlier scene to show that at the very moment when coprophagia reaches its most vivid moment of textual significance, it is denied all representation.

Much like Renton's implicit claim that the power relationships symbolised by coprophagia are tempered only by a kind of narrative pliability (he can playfully distort the dealer-client relationship, but can't alter its fundamental dynamic), the claim for coprophagic power attempted by the waitress is tempered by knowledge of the futility of the act; a gesture of defiance which knows its inability to fundamentally change the balance of power. Although the waitress declares that she "feel[s] charged wi a great power", knowledge of consequences follow immediately after: "Ah hope Graeme disnae get intae trouble. I hope they dinnae close the restaurant doon" (305). The waitress has escaped the power dynamic established earlier in the passage only by a self-negation; her concerns are not for her own well-being, nor that of her client-victims. Coprophagia thus acts as a symbol of power in a comparable

manner to Duke Nukem 3D, but its literary significance may lie in the ability of characters to use it to play with and shift such power without diminishing it. The novel implies that, for many of its narrators, even small victories may be part of an inevitable failure to take lasting control of any power dynamic. Within such a rubric, true revenge arguably becomes impossible.

If coprophagic revenge-fantasy is subsumed in narrative and incorporated into broader power relationships in *Trainspotting*, it plays the opposite role in Howard Jacobson's 1998 novel, *Redback*, where a tale of revenge-by-excrement opens the novel and, in true Freudian fashion, determines much later character development. However, unlike many of the other texts mentioned earlier, in which coprophagic dynamics emerge from a clear narrative progression, Redback commences with a coprophagic anecdote then discusses little else on the topic until the incident is mentioned again – in order to for it be revealed to be the narrator's own experience - near the end of the book. The anecdote itself involves the unusual combination of unwanted coprophagia and sexual collusion; a "gaunt" young man studying at Oxford University meets "a young and well-connected Australian woman with powerful mandibles" (7), and shows her around the town. After dinner, the couple retire to the student's room, where, mid-coitus, she "explains that she is a woman not an altar, and accuses (the student) of lacking joy, competence and animality" (7). When the student takes offence and falls asleep, she proceeds to defecate on the sleeping man's chest, leaving him to find "a faecal offering smelling of fish and pasta (of tagliatelle marinara) – nestling among the soft hairs of his chest, only inches from his gaping mouth" (8).

Once again, the horror of coprophagia represents the exposure of a power dynamic in flux – the student finds that his willingness to adopt the role of an archetypal Oxford student is inadequate in the face of the "joy, competence and animality" his partner perceives to be desirable in a sexual partner. Without cues provided by his local environment or the nature of the situation he finds himself in, the narrator struggles to articulate any kind of sexual personality. Moreover, it is seldom clear who is using whom; Desley is "half accosted by, and half herself accosts" the student, and the mention of "powerful mandibles" suggests a positive, albeit predatorial, contrast to her "gaunt" partner. Depsite being written as an anecdotal revenge-farce, the act of Desley's defecation may be neither a protest nor an assertion of dominance, but a continuation of the embattled relationship established in the preceding material – an act of frustration motivated by a stalemate in a power struggle. Similarly, the association of food and shit occurs in a similar way to that of Trainspotting – attempting to disguise coprophagia by describing faeces only in terms of its associated foodstuffs, tagliatelle marinara - but in doing so adding only to the inverted narrative expectations (and physical horror) of the passage. Further equivalence is suggested by the use of the term "offering", a curious inversion of Desley's claim that she "is a woman not an altar"; evoking the sacrificial, proto-Biblical language of submission. Desley is, in short, prevented the narrative of domination that her protocoprophagic act may otherwise offer by narrative trickery on the part of Leon, who utilises language to cast doubt on a singular narrative of revenge.

Such narrative trickery does not end there. Jacobson explicitly portrays the symbolism of shit as key to understanding the events of the novel; his opening chapter attempts to make sense of the anecdote by offering a series of potential interpretations. Chief amongst these is the incitement to a psychoanalytic analysis – particularly tempting given the protagonist's initial description of the turd as a "Freudian gift", and his narrative association of a sexual 'awakening' with his father's abandonment of him to an all-female household (9). Yet the novel abounds with gestures towards symbolic meaning which prove to be misleading. Even Karl Leon Forelock's name, with its implication of socialist (Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky) and Jewish identities, is exposed as problematic; Leon's insistent attempts to change his political affiliations are rejected by his academic arbiters, and Jewish identity plays little explicit role in the novel at all. Indeterminacy emerging from an expected narrative sequence is crucial to understanding Leon's physical and social impotence; rereading the coprophagic anecdote that commences his narrative, it seems that a failure to fit events into preconceived narrative models is where most of the character's problems stem from.

Later in the text, it becomes apparent that Leon has attempted to construct a false history of his Australian associations, revealing him to be an untrustworthy narrator. The distance between the narrator and the simulated coprophagic act becomes shortened; Leon confesses that the student in his opening anecdote was himself, and that the events took place in his alma mater, Cambridge, rather than Oxford. His defence is characteristically circuitous: "Would you have been able to show the proper intellectual regard for the spiritual history of a man who, on the very first page of his confessions, confessed to having been shat on by an Australian?" (307). Leon's defence cites the fear of coprophilic humiliation being interpreted as a symbol of his inadequacies as a conventional literary narrator. The pithiness of the excuse masks deeper issues – Leon's unreliability as a narrator emerges from his attempts to control narrative, rather than his inability to match a set of generic literary standards. Leon does not take into account the duplicitous descriptive language of the original anecdote; the fear of confessing to humiliation is seen in the language of the anecdote itself. As such, the intended contrast between highbrow literary standards and the "very different kind of far-away femaleness" (26) associated with Australia is ultimately the same as that intended by the opening passage. Like that anecdote, the intended differences mask power relationships which are significantly more complicated; exposed, but not reconciled, by the proximity of Desley's shit to Leon's "gaping mouth".

Leon's eventual physical impotence stems from an inability to control the implications of coprophilic and coprophagic symbolism in his own narrative; it determines not only his inability to 'confess' in a manner suggested by would-be "spiritual history" style, but also reflects the way that the character has little control over the central events in his life. Both the narrative of Leon's life and the way the narrative is depicted suggest a fundamental uncertainty related to shit - when Leon gets bitten by a redback spider that cripples his libido, it seems only natural that it occurs in an outhouse after being sexually rejected, once again, by Desley. The rejection is made because Leon refuses to ask to "fuck with", rather than simply "fuck", Desley. Her claim that "you don't fuck me, you fuck with me" is more than petty, power-asserting obfuscation; it doubles as an accurate description of the manner

in which she is described by Leon. By depicting Leon as 'fucking with' coprophagic narrative to mask his shame, Jacobson suggests that Leon may have made his first step towards the complete alienation he experiences at the novel's end.

So why didn't Desley shit in Leon's mouth in the first place? Chiefly practical reasons; the athleticism required to defecate with any great deal of accuracy, and the difficulty of defecating into Leon's mouth without waking him up and spoiling her attempted revenge. Yet of all the texts discussed here, Redback creates, in Desley, a character who most clearly illustrates the potential to toy with the narrative and political power dynamics revealed through coprophagic acts; as such, her revenge becomes all the more potent by exposing the machinations of her nemesis. By analysing textual moments where coprophagia is simulated, a greater knowledge of the narrative mechanics of the texts in question may be gained. Perhaps de Sade's anonymous client, with his missing turds, offers a mystery that need not be solved; the simulation of coprophagia can be used to introduce a vast array of themes and potential power relationships. A purely coprophagic act may lend itself to being incorporated into narrative or theoretical models which may be of less purely literary interest although fans of Veronika Moser may well argue that such dangers do not make the act itself any less exciting.

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