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THE PERFORMANCE OF CONTROL AND THE  
CONTROL OF PERFORMANCE: TOWARDS A SOCIAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEFECATION

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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# **The Performance of Control and the Control of Performance: towards a social anthropology of defecation.**

## **Abstract**

Defecation has remained overlooked within anthropology and sociology despite recent focus on the body. The thesis suggests that this is related to its construction as something hidden in the last few hundred years of modern Western society. It is physically and mentally dismissed as personal and biological rather than social or cultural. The few references that exist enable one to argue that it always has significance as a repetitive daily activity needing careful social management and which is crucial to the definition of personhood. Its praxis reveals much about social values concerning differentiation by age, sex, gender and generation. Freud, Elias, Bakhtin and Douglas have influenced its image but do not adequately explain it. Phenomenological theories of embodiment and ideas of cultural performance are shown to be more useful in demonstrating that defecation is a lived cultural experience. The focus is on contemporary Britain, studied through participant observation and day-to-day participation, using material from conversations, anecdotes, observations, experiences, media reports, novels, and films encountered during the period of research. The main themes that emerge are privacy, hiddenness, embarrassment and concern but also that it is welcomed as physical release, and as offering valued periods of time-out and solitude. It is also a symbol of both all that is low and all that is deep. These contradictions are analysed through the two axes of control/loss of control and release/containment. It is argued against recent medical anthropological and sociological studies of incontinence that it cannot be assumed that the opposite of incontinence is continence and containment. The issue of control is paramount, rather than the issue of containment in itself.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis is about defecation, one of the most fundamental functions of our lives. It may seem the most natural of functions, something everyone is born able to do, but it is something that is performed in very specific cultural and historical ways. It is a universal human activity, subject to social arrangements in all societies, and yet appears rarely or sparingly in anthropological or sociological analysis. It will be my argument in this thesis that defecation is an important process through which identity and relationships are constituted over time. Focusing on experiences of excretion in contemporary Britain, I aim to show how ideas about who we are (as British, as adults, as men or women, as civilised, as private, as funny, as healthy) are partly created and reconfirmed daily through defecation and the use of the toilet.

## A Neglected Subject

As a meaningful, recurring activity, continually experienced by bodies of all ages, it is surprising that excretion in daily life has not received more attention from anthropologists, particularly with the growing interest in the body. The focus on human embodiment over the last twenty years is a recognition that all culture including the rituals, kinship systems, initiation rites, political systems, religions and myths traditionally studied by anthropologists, only exists because we are physical beings in a physical world. From conception we are in a material relationship with those around us and it is through these relationships that we are brought into existence and are able to survive in the world. Being born and brought up in a world that already exists as ready-made means that the kinship and political systems, religious beliefs, myths and rituals etc. that surround us condition our existence as much as our biological structure and the physical environment, and it is through our responses to these conditions that we become who we are (see chapter two).

Human embodiment, then, is crucial for understanding human society because it is only through corporeality that people can interact at all. Cross-cultural studies have long shown the variation in forms of embodiment as well as variations in forms of sociality, and anthropology has studied this variation over the last century. Of

particular interest to anthropologists have been those aspects of human life that seem very different from the anthropologists' own societies such as the kinship systems which emphasised certain relationships over others or identified categories that did not exist in their own societies, or defined who could and could not marry or eat with whom; the complex systems of exchange that differed from capitalist monetary systems; the beliefs that contradicted scientific principles or Judeo-Christian truths. These and many other aspects needed to be explained by anthropologists to show that the bizarre was in fact merely variation on common facts and conditions of existence. They made order out of the apparent chaos of other societies. The unfamiliar ways of organising daily life demanded an explanation because they challenged what was taken for granted by the anthropologists and their audiences. However, while many of the mundane repetitive tasks of daily living such as collecting, preparing and eating food, relationships between kin, or maintaining the home, have been considered in detail, it seems that at the same time certain other aspects of daily life were overlooked or paid less attention, especially those activities that seemed, as universal functions of biology, to be uninteresting culturally. Defecation is one of those neglected aspects.

The fact that something has been ignored or dismissed does not mean that it is without importance. As Frankenberg (2000a) said, looking at the specificity of negativity, the presence of absence, what has *not* been done, can be illuminating. Anthropology prides itself on its ability to study the taken for granted in society through its methodology of prolonged fieldwork, but it seems that sometimes what goes without saying remains, through this silence, unnoticed and unstudied. In the 1970s feminist anthropologists started to point out the systematic neglect of the active roles of women in all aspects of the societies being studied (Moore 1988), just as during the 1990s there was an increasing realisation that children had been ignored as active participants and creators of culture (Toren 1999). Caplan (1988), writing as a feminist anthropologist, notes her own astonishment at what she had overlooked during earlier fieldwork despite her focus on women and gender relationships. Tracing her changing perspective on gender over three fieldwork trips to Mafia Island, she was surprised by her realisation in 1985 that women eat after men and frequently did not get enough to eat, and frustrated that she had not taken any notice of this during her previous fieldwork visits in spite of its importance to gender

relationships. Caplan acknowledges that the questions she asked at each period of fieldwork were influenced by her developing and changing theoretical (and historical) perspective, which rendered certain aspects of social life more trivial than others.

Geertz (1972) also shows how important aspects of social life can be passed over in favour of other aspects. In his now classic paper, he notes that in spite of the many and detailed anthropological studies of Bali, the significance of cockfights had been barely noticed apart from a few passing remarks. He goes on to show that in fact cockfighting is at least as important to Balinese identity as any of the other, more usual focuses of study such as mythology, art, social organisation and so on (1972: 5). Reading his paper now, it seems surprising that such an important and, from Geertz's description, visible activity could have been overlooked by previous anthropologists, but amidst the other aspects of Balinese culture that obtruded on their notice the significance of the ubiquitous fighting cocks was missed.

Williams and Bendelow (1998: 171-187) dedicate a chapter of their book about the sociology of embodiment to another "strangely neglected" activity that has striking parallels with defecation. Sleep is another fundamental aspect of human embodiment, essential to survival and comfort, and although it seems to be something natural, even a cursory cross-cultural comparison shows the different possibilities of performing and experiencing it (Peter 1953, Mauss 1992). Whether sleep takes place in view of others or in private, alone or with other people, lying down, sitting or standing, at night or in the day, for how long, whether or not dreams are significant – all these aspects vary from society to society and from time to time. As something experienced and lived through, sleep influences spatio-temporal arrangements, language and literature, institutional arrangements, rituals and mythologies: the how, when and where of sleep are thoroughly social and historical phenomena. Sleep, they argue, "constitutes a central social resource" and provides "a key sociological indicator of societal development": "It is here, at the intersection of physiological *need*, environmental *constraint* and sociocultural *elaboration* that the *emergent* nature of sleep as a sociological process is most readily apparent" (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 175 their italics).



The parallels between defecation and sleep are illuminating. Like sleep, defecation is subject to spatio-temporal arrangements. While perhaps less fixed than sleep (which generally, but not always, occurs at night), defecation is subject to ideas about regularity (in Ghana, for example, the Akan believe that one bowel movement every day in the morning is essential to health (van der Geest 1998) while Western medicine believes that individual regularity is more important, whether that be three times a day or three times a week<sup>1</sup> (Macpherson 1999)). In most (probably all) societies defecation takes place in a dedicated space separated from living space and deviation from this is not permitted except in severe illness or early childhood, but even in these situations defecation is subject to particular arrangements. Like sleep, defecation in the contemporary West has become a private activity which, for adults, takes place out of sight of other people except those with whom one is intimate (Elias 1994, and see chapter three); like sleep, defecation is associated with comfort, and sensual and sexual pleasure (Freud 1977, and see chapter four); and like sleep, defecation is ambiguously associated both with life and renewal and with death (Bakhtin 1984, and see chapter five).

Williams and Bendelow's argument about sleep can help us to understand why defecation has been ignored by anthropologists, or dismissed, as Loudon (1977: 162) put it, as a topic worth only a scatological bagatelle. Williams and Bendelow suggest that sleep has not been considered as a sociological issue because it appears as a "highly personal, privatised experience in contemporary Western society – a liminal, unconscious, aspect of bodily being and an 'a-social', 'in-active' form of corporeal 'activity'" (1998: 172). This has led to its exclusion from the study of social life, and to it being seen as merely an unconscious act and biological necessity that lends itself more to biological or psychoanalytic concern. In a similar way, defecation is a personal and privatised experience in the West, and for this reason has been considered as a non-social or a-social act, unlike eating and sex which are recognised as highly social functions through which social relationships are created, maintained and transformed. However, as Loudon (1977) suggested and as I hope to show in this

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<sup>1</sup> Although many people in the West share the Akan view that one bowel movement a day is necessary.

thesis, defecation (like sleep) as a function of human existence can only ever be a social act that creates and reproduces relationships.

This reading of Williams and Bendelow's argument suggests that the reason for such a fundamental human function and socially important act not to have caught the attention of anthropologists is that it was not considered as having sufficient social significance. There are hints in the anthropological literature about the role of defecation in the formation and maintenance of social relationships, for example where toilet training or sites of defecation are mentioned in passing, although the subject is rarely included in the index which makes searching for references hard. Malinowski (1932: 374-377), for example, spends three pages discussing the Trobriand Islanders' attitude toward excretion but there is no direct entry in the index for the subject.

Even where faeces is the apparent focus of a paper, the sociality of the process of defecation is skimmed over. Panoff (1970) in "Food and faeces: a Melanesian rite" writes that old sites of collective latrines of the Maenge of New Britain can be used as fertile land for cultivation by the matrilineal kin of the former occupants of the hamlet (1970: 243). Although he mentions that in the past collective latrines were segregated by sex, he says nothing else about these places or anything about the contemporary situation, despite the implied importance of these sites in ideas of kinship and land rights. We learn that the Maenge are ambivalent about excrement, regarding faeces as both impure and valuable as fertiliser, but Panoff draws on psychoanalytic theory to analyse this in terms of the development of individual psyche, rather than using anthropological theory to analyse the production of faeces as constitutive of social relationships in the same way as he discusses food production. As Williams and Bendelow said of sleep, defecation is seen as the province of psychoanalysis rather than social theory.

In his paper on faecal animals, Sapir (1977) also passes over the sociological significance of defecation. In discussing the *siwúúm* or animal doubles that the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal may, at some time during their life, produce through an act of defecation, Sapir focuses on their importance in the constitution of kin relations. He compares ordinary animals with the animal doubles, and compares

relationships between the animal doubles and human kin, but says little about the production of the doubles. Although he draws an analogy between birth and defecation (both acts can produce a live form, and both take place outside the living compound), he makes no comparison between defecating a live animal and normal defecating. He argues that the *siwúúm* make people complete and that, from conception, a person has the potential of an animal double inside him or herself. This suggests that defecation is always potentially a creative and self-creative act for the Kujamaat Diola, but without any information about the ordinary day-to-day act of excretion this can be no more than a suggestion.

Both Panoff and Sapir, like several other anthropologists, mention toilet training in passing; Sapir indicates that defecating inside the living compound is only tolerated in very young children, and Panoff mentions that Maenge children can defecate anywhere until the age of three or four. The fact that they mention this at all implies that the authors recognise that one of the ways in which children are defined as children, and through which children come to constitute themselves as full members of the society into which they are born, is through the processes of excretion. However, the process of children's constitution of appropriate excretory behaviour, or the involvement of older children and adults in the process, is not elaborated.

So anthropologists have paid little attention to defecation as a social function that both constitutes and is constituted through social relationships, despite their recognition that it is sometimes worth mentioning toilet training, sites of defecation and/or the role of faeces in magic or ritual (for example Wilson 1957 cited by Loudon 1977). I have suggested that part of this neglect may be due to a perception on behalf of anthropologists that defecation is an a-social activity of more interest to biology or psychology. Another related reason is because of the psychoanalytic monopoly on interest in faeces. Because of the legacy of Freud in the history of Western thought, too great an interest in defecation is seen as symptomatic of some unresolved childhood trauma, and to reveal this in an academic text may be considered either too personal or too offensive. Turnbull (1974) makes a telling statement early on in his book about his fieldwork with the Ik in Sudan:

I am sure the psychologists would have something to say about it, but the fact that my field notes are filled with reference to defecation is really no more

than a reflection of my zeal in recording everything that I noticed, and, customs being what they were, the phenomenon was open, widespread and highly noticeable. (1974: 66)

Douglas makes a similar reference in her argument about pollution when, suggesting that one of the reasons why certain theorists suggest “primitive” culture is excremental, she comments that “for various reasons best known to psychologists, any reference to excremental magic seems to leap to the reader’s eye and absorb attention” (Douglas 1984: 119). As I will discuss in chapter two, Freud was one of the first and most influential writers to recognise the significance of excretion in the constitution of personhood. However, the legacy of his work is that interest in excrement by an adult is considered puerile or pathological. It is astonishing that Turnbull should feel the need to justify making full fieldwork notes on everything he observed, but such is the discomfort of introducing the topic into public discourse. Of course, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, there are plenty of occasions in which defecation is mentioned in public discourse, but these usually demand some kind of pre-emptive statement, such as Turnbull’s, as an apology or justification for raising the subject.

While Douglas’ statement is not an apology, she too implies that an interest in excretion requires a psychological explanation. While her arguments on pollution offer a social explanation for why faeces may be abhorred, she explicitly denies that she is making any statements about personal experience of defecating. The Coorgs of India, she argues, regard faeces as ritually polluting, but defecate anywhere and everywhere (1984: 124). She uses this example to illustrate the usefulness of her sociological approach over a psychoanalytic one suggesting that a sociological explanation is needed for social ritual and a psychoanalytic explanation is needed for personal behaviour (such as noticing references to excremental magic). However, as I will argue in chapter two where I also discuss Douglas’ ideas more fully, all human action whether in ritual or in daily life is embodied and performed within social and historical relationships; we are born into a world that already exists and make meaning through our participation.

If the social significance of defecation has been passed over under the assumption that it is not important in the formation of social relationships and cultural meaning,

even where toilet training or communal areas for defecation are mentioned, this may also say something about the anthropologist him or herself, and anthropology as a discipline; “There are tastes in anthropological research, just as there are tastes in one’s choice of food and its presentation” (Reed-Danahay 1996: 759), and there seems to be a reluctance to investigate and discuss material that may be considered in bad taste, particularly when it refers to the researcher him or herself. Anthropologists often mention their presence and participation in daily life during fieldwork, such as participating in meals, becoming classificatory kin, or their involvement in ritual performances, both in the spirit of reflexivity and as a valuable source of information, but they rarely mention where they themselves defecate. In a rare exception, van der Geest (1998) shows how his determination to participate fully during his fieldwork in Ghana was thwarted on his second day when he was taken to the communal latrine. The smell, the sight, and the presence of other people, made him unable to go, and he henceforth made secret arrangements to use the facilities at a local mission. Although he does not mention this in the article one assumes that he did not have so much trouble participating in eating and sleeping like the Akan. Turnbull (1974: 93) also mentions how he managed this function when carrying out fieldwork with the Ik. At first what he refers to as “an ancient prudery” prevented him from using the space just outside his house used by the Ik. Instead he had to go in search of privacy, “and even then Ik were likely to pop out from behind a nearby boulder”. Later, though, he seemed to manage to overcome his “prudery” enough to share the communal space with the Ik (after first demarcating a defecation-free area immediately outside his house), a space which gave a spectacular view across the valley so his morning toilet “seemed as good a time as any to enjoy the view”.

In general, however, anthropologists have avoided such a discussion, perhaps – paradoxically – as a symptom of a reluctance to indulge in what Stoller (1989) refers to as “tasteful ethnography”. Stoller suggests that anthropologists have tended to ignore the sensual experience of fieldwork, particularly in writing up and theorising their data. He argues that anthropologists should become “tastefully immersed in their field surroundings” and represent their sensual experience in their writing in order to present a fuller picture of what the societies they describe are really like. His first image in his picture of the sensual realities of urban Niger which struck him on his first visit in 1969 is of “naked children defecating into the ditches which carried

the city's sewage" , but this sensual openness was short-lived and he "soon lost scent of the nose-crinkling stench of the open sewer" (1989: 3-4). By the time he came to write up his fieldwork data, this kind of detail no longer seemed important, and was – he felt – actively discouraged in academic writing. Stoller uses the word "tasteful" to mean sensual, full of taste, but its more usual meaning is of socially correct or appropriate, and the antonym of both senses of "tasteful" is distasteful, veering on the disgusting. To write "tasteful" ethnography, in Stoller's terms, would be to risk writing something academically inappropriate or disgusting. Paradoxically, then, to write "tastefully" would be to include the "distasteful". It is no coincidence, therefore, that both van der Geest's article and Turnbull's book, in which the sensual perceptions of the authors are included as part of the anthropological material, are published at the popular end of anthropology rather than within the more academic literature. In his attempt to redress the balance, Stoller focuses on his own sensual experience of living in Niger, although he does not mention any experiences of bodily functions.

Discussing excremental themes at all can be considered distasteful. One English scholar told Dundes after he had presented a paper on scatology in German folklore, that there are some things he preferred not to know (Dundes 1984: viii) and an earlier paper on the same theme had been deemed "inappropriate for after dinner"<sup>2</sup>. Reed-Danahay (1996: 758) records that "unease, embarrassment, and, at times, revulsion have been common reactions among colleagues (anthropologists who work in Europe, other anthropologists, and, especially, European intellectuals)" to whom she described the practice of *la rôtie* which she observed in the Auvergne region of France. This marriage ritual involves the preparation and drinking of a mixture of champagne and chocolate served in a chamber pot, and Reed-Danahay shows how explicit are the participants about the scatological nature of the contents. She found that the practice had been widespread throughout France and was still practised in other parts of the country. Despite this, she was given the distinct impression by colleagues in France and America that not only the ritual but her telling about it was considered in bad taste, although she suspects that the problem was that she was

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<sup>2</sup> As I discuss later in this chapter, these comments may also have been censoring statements that helped to frame Dundes' discussion and, paradoxically, allowed it to continue.

discussing the presence of a scatological ritual too close to home. She writes that “had I observed a similar practice in a non-Western context, its scatological connotations would not be so repugnant” (1996: 758). Hadolt (1999) experienced some similar reactions when discussing his work on the debate generated by Austrian newspapers about the artist Kolig who uses faeces in his art work. Shit, he writes, “is dirty and sticky matter and as such is prone to spoiling one’s (academic) ‘symbolic capital’” (1999: 181). One of his colleagues warned him against getting “linked with the topic of shit”<sup>3</sup>.

### Reflexivity in anthropology

Stoller argues for the inclusion of the sensual experience of the researcher in academic theses as a way of presenting a clearer picture of what life is really like. While he is talking specifically about trying to convey the evidence of all the senses rather than just what is seen and heard, he is inevitably arguing for the explicit inclusion of the anthropologist’s personal experience. Over the last twenty years there has been a growing awareness in anthropology that one’s own experience cannot help but inform not just what is noticed but how theory is used, and anthropologists have been urged to make their presence apparent in the text (for example see Clifford and Marcus 1986, Okely and Callaway 1992).

Okely (1992) argues that, just as feminists asserted in the 1970s that ‘the personal is political’, so too, in the academic context, is the personal theoretical.

Anthropologists, she states, “are steeped in the anecdotal”, noting down stories and gossip that people tell them, trivial daily observations, and things that occur to them during their day. Although excluded from academic texts in the positivist tradition of social science, the self – like excrement itself – “could not naturally be suppressed” and would “leak out” in other ways in diaries, conversation, fiction, etc. (Okely 1992: 9-10). Okely writes that some of the more autobiographical ethnographic accounts have been dismissed as “confessional; too embarrassingly uncontrolled or

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<sup>3</sup> Longhurst (2001: 89) discusses a similar omission in geographical discourse, suggesting that the reason for this is not simply because it is banal or unimportant but because they (bathrooms and toilets) are threatening “to those who play a role in constructing what counts as ‘legitimate’ knowledge in geography and who can bear that knowledge”.

unedited for mainstream acceptance” because “to describe the dailiness and minutiae of personal encounters in the field is to question the ‘fine distinctions’ between public and private” (Okley 1992: 12). Quigley (2000), for example, recently argued that “short stories about one’s own individual experiences are no substitute for the kind of comparative understanding of the human condition which is built on sustained observation of the experiences of others.” (2000: 21). He dismisses the inclusion of personal experience and anecdote in anthropology, arguing that it is merely “a pretext for a narcissistic epistemology: an anthropology of the self, of individual experience” (Quigley 2000: 21). Proper anthropologists, he says, are those who “have refused to succumb to the idea that an adequate explanation of social life is obtained by reference to one’s own experiences.” (Quigley 2000: 21).

However, at some point all anthropologists have been struck by something that interests them amongst all the things they have observed, participated in and discussed, and their experience of being in the situation of observing, participating and discussing leads them to their focus (Okely 1992: 1). Van der Geest’s anecdote about being taken to the public latrines in Ghana does not give the reader a great insight into local experience (since it is his own reactions that he comments on), but it revealed to him something that his hosts took for granted and helped him to make connections between different aspects of Akan life. Geertz’s story about the cockfight raid shows how the experience led him both into an appreciation of the significance of cockfights and into acceptance by the local people, and it required a retelling in his paper to convey the theoretical and methodological importance of the episode.

Personal experience can also allow for an understanding of the experience of others that goes beyond the traditional methods of detached observation and listening. Favret-Saada (1980) writing about witchcraft in the Bocage region of France argues that the only way to understand is “to become one’s own informant, to penetrate one’s own amnesia, and to try and make explicit what one finds unstateable in oneself” (Favret-Saada 1980: 22). Edie Turner (1992) did just this following her personal experience of seeing a spirit-form emerge during a healing ritual. This experience made her rethink her previous ideas of the ritual which had been based on years of participant observation and the underlying assumption that spirits did not



really exist. Ots (1994), following his personal experiences in studying qiqong in China (as a participant rather than an anthropologist), also calls for an approach “where one goes beyond participant observation – “experiencing participation” would be more to the point” (1994: 134).

As well as allowing for a more embodied understanding of the experiences of others, “experiencing participation” also allows for a closer relationship between anthropologist and informant. Geertz showed this in his description of how his informants changed in attitude toward him following his shared experience of the raid. Okely (1992: 17) also talks of the importance of shared experience in the process of anthropological fieldwork, such as when she learned to hand milk cows in Normandy, or deal in scrap metal with the Gypsies. Participating in these ways not only gave her credibility in the eyes of her informants, but also gave her an embodied knowledge of the daily experience of others. Lawler (1991) and Seymour (1998) both drew on their personal experiences of, respectively, nursing and having a physical disability to create an intimacy between themselves and their informants to allow for a sharing of personal information.

These examples show that if the personal is theoretical, as Okely wrote, it is also methodological. This approach implicitly recognises that the researcher is an embodied presence in the lives of the people studied. An attention to bodiliness, or – as Csordas (1990) put it – embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology, is also methodological as well as theoretical, collapsing the duality between theory and practice, body and mind, as will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter. This study is about defecation in (as I discuss below) my own cultural and social milieu, so I am inevitably already situated in my research as participant because I, like everyone else, experience defecation on a more or less daily basis. I also experience the embarrassments, anxieties and humour of my own and other peoples’ acts and stories. In taking the personal, that is my own embodiment, as theoretical and methodological I am following Csordas who called for an approach in which “prereflective gut feeling and sensory engagement are raised to the level of methodological self-consciousness by insertion of a phenomenological sense of embodiment into the ethnographic enterprise.” (Csordas 1999:150).

I state these points about personal experience as a preamble to why I embarked on this research because the impetus to study defecation came from an incident I experienced at the time of deciding on a topic for my master's thesis. I was using the toilet at home and the thought crossed my mind, "I could do my dissertation on shitting". The thought amused me at first, but simultaneously my mind filled with questions that I wanted to answer, particularly as I recalled observations and experiences from a year spent living in a rural Indian community<sup>4</sup>. I remembered my shock and fascination at seeing men squatting openly (what I then interpreted as 'in public') to defecate, my embarrassment at the openness with which my bowel movements were discussed by others when I was ill, and my initial struggle with and later appreciation of the unfamiliar toilet facilities. I was also struck by the realisation that I had never, at that point, seen any mention of defecation in the anthropological literature (apart from in Mary Douglas's work on pollution). Later that day I telephoned a friend from the degree course to tell her my idea. She shared my enthusiasm and we talked about the subject, ways of looking at it, and why it was a valid topic for study. After about half an hour, she mentioned that she was in the bathroom defecating and had been throughout our conversation. I was shocked; I couldn't imagine answering the phone while sitting on the toilet, let alone telling the caller what I was doing. This experience for me highlighted the ambiguities of the subject and enthused me to explore it further, in the process of which I realised that I needed to expand the work to doctorate level in order to explore more fully this fascinating and complex subject.

I repeat this story here because in so far as anthropology defines itself as a comparative discipline which, through detailed study of everyday life, reveals the arbitrariness of the taken for granted, it was through comparison (between England and India, and between myself and my friend) that I was led into the world of shit. The story I describe is not presented as saying anything decisive about excretory behaviour in Britain (or India), but it is a microcosmic example of some of the issues that later became more apparent through research, particularly the issues around privacy. It was as much through my personal experience of the discomfort I felt when my friend told me what she was doing (my "prereflective gut feeling") as

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<sup>4</sup> Two periods of six months (1984 and 1990) spent living and working in a leprosy colony.

through my intellectual contemplations about the social construction of defecation, that I decided to focus on excretion.

### **Field and fieldwork: Home and homework**

This personal experience also led me to focus on what Bourdieu (2000) referred to as one's own social milieu of origin. Doing anthropology "at home" is nothing new (see Jackson 1987), but doing anthropology in one's own social milieu of origin is contentious in anthropology and risks being called narcissistic (Quigley 2000). Although anthropology may have started off as the study of other, "primitive" cultures (Keesing 1981, MacClancy 1995: 508), since the Mass Observation studies of the 1930s anthropologists have studied societies closer to home. However, although these studies are considered "anthropology at home" (Jackson 1987), most are still studies of an "other"; the anthropologists are not usually from the society that they are studying as a bounded group. Indeed, Frankenberg (1990: 5) – a pioneer of anthropology in Britain – shows that not only was he an outsider (non-Welsh, non-Christian) in the Welsh village, but also he was perceived as foreign by the villagers who regarded him as German (because of his name), and some suspected him of being that most dangerous of outsiders, a spy. Similarly, Rapport (1992: 201) says that he was perceived as an outsider, possibly of French origin (rather than Welsh and Jewish) by the inhabitants of the village he studied in North England. Even Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987), who describes herself as a "native anthropologist" (by which she means "an anthropologist, who through and from birth, is an active and integral member of the society studied" (1987: 192)) is not in fact carrying out fieldwork in her own social milieu of origin despite working in a place where she and her family have a historical presence: having been born and brought up among Goan Catholics in Kenya and subsequently living in England, her fieldwork was carried out in a village in Goa.

However, for Strathern (1987) the issue is conceptual rather than geographical. It is not about whether the anthropologist is studying in his or her own home country, but is about "the relationship between their techniques of organizing knowledge and how people organize knowledge about themselves" (1987: 31). Rather than "anthropology at home" Strathern talks about "auto-anthropology" which she defines as

“anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” (1987: 17), that is, in a situation where the people being studied have an idea of society as something that can be studied such that what is written about them could be made sense of by them, and draws on concepts which also belong to the society and culture under study.

Even if we use the term auto-anthropology rather than anthropology at home, there is still the question of the relationship between the researcher and the researched where these are from the same socio-cultural milieu. Watson recently defined anthropology as “the discipline of explaining the behaviour and thoughts of people bounded within a culture in terms that are intelligible to people outside that culture” (1999: 1), or as “coming to an understanding of other people” (1999: 2). This definition still stresses the sense of anthropology as the study of “the other” by a stranger, and considers fieldwork as something done elsewhere – a place to which one goes and then returns. Jackson states that the main distinctive characteristic of anthropology is that anthropologists *go* and live with the people under investigation (1987: 13). This presupposes a defined site of research, a bounded group of people from whom the researcher is initially detached. Anthropologists such as Frankenberg, Rapport and Mascarenhas-Keyes were doing just that. However, when carrying out research in one’s own milieu of origin, the researcher is already immersed in the daily life, he or she does not have to go to or return from the field because he or she is already there. What demarcates the endeavour as anthropology (as opposed to sociology, cultural studies or psychology, say) is that it focuses on the minutiae of daily life and draws on comparison to highlight the arbitrariness of the everyday to try to understand the meaning that people make of their own experience. As Quigley wrote, “one can do anthropology without undertaking fieldwork. One cannot do anthropology without being comparative.” (Quigley 2000: 20).

In researching defecation in contemporary England I have not carried out conventional fieldwork in which I studied a defined and bounded group of others. What I was doing was more like what B. Williams (1995) calls “homework”. Williams, an experienced anthropologist, decided to study homeless beggars on the New York subway during her daily journey to and from work. She used participant observation methods, noting both the performances of the beggars and the reactions

of her fellow commuters. She describes her method as “homework” rather than “fieldwork” because rather than attempting an ethnography of homelessness or begging, the impetus for her work was to try to understand whether and to whom she should or would give charity. Fieldwork, she argues, is a tactical method for understanding another culture, whereas homework is a strategic method for becoming a more informed consumer of ones own culture (1995: 38). Like Williams, the starting point for my research was to understand aspects of my own social milieu of origin in which I was inevitably and routinely already involved. Through my participation in daily life, and through anthropological reflection, I had already become aware of the ambiguities and complexities surrounding defecation in contemporary England, just as Williams had become aware of homeless beggars through her encounters on the subway. However, unlike Williams my aim is not merely to become a more informed participant in my own culture<sup>5</sup> but to contribute to anthropological theory by highlighting the importance of a hitherto background activity.

The parallels with Williams’ work are less in her intention than in the practice of her research in that it was incorporated into her routine daily life. Throughout the years of being registered for my doctoral research I have been in (more or less) full time employment at a local Health Authority, and have, in effect, been in (and continue to be in) “the field” of my study. Studying in my daily life means that my informants are the people around me that I encounter on a day to day basis, along with the information that forces itself on my attention, because of my cultural and reflexive alertness to the subject, through films, books, newspapers, magazines, television etc. These media are as much my informants as the people I speak to, overhear, see, or am told about because they are written or produced by people of a similar cultural milieu, as ways to express and communicate experience. I have referred in particular to popular art and media rather than more avant-garde or experimental art because, by definition, this is what appeals to the majority as it is more accessible and easily recognised as familiar.

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<sup>5</sup> although clearly, from my questions about the incident with my friend cited above, I cannot deny that this played a part

Anthropologists, writes Jackson (1987: 13), feel a need to find a bounded unit to study, however illusory, even though in modern Western society increasing mobility makes this difficult. Taking as my area of study my social milieu of origin and current daily life, and focusing on a particular aspect of daily life, does not allow for the definition of a bounded group, or rather, it reveals the fluidity and flux of modern urban life that defies boundaries. Although most of my conversations, interviews and observations took place in London at the end of the twentieth century, I was continually being referred back in history to earlier periods of English life and to other parts of England and Britain as a whole (and sometimes into Europe or America) as I moved around physically or virtually through reading or watching television. Informants and producers of written and visual material varied in age, sex, class, religion, colour and ethnic origin so defining them as a group or bounded unit is not useful, except in the broadest sense of being British (or more generally Western) and being recognised by each other as such. Like Charsley's (1987) study of marriage customs, this study was aiming "to learn about a limited aspect of people's lives" through multiple discussions, rather than to produce an ethnography of a region. Charsley carried out his research in Glasgow, but he found that "the distributions of the ideas and practices studied are manifestly varied, so that it is proper in one context to relate them to sections of Glasgow society, in another perhaps to Scottish society as a whole, in another ...to British society." (1987: 94). In a similar way, the experiences and meanings of defecation presented in this thesis may have been uttered or otherwise communicated by a particular person of a particular time and place, but these experiences and meanings will be recognised by others of a similar milieu. To talk of Britain or England, then, is not to talk about a geographical space, a political nationality, or even an imagined community (Anderson 1991), but is a short hand way of describing people within a particular historically constituted mode of embodiment (Mellor and Shilling 1997, and see chapter two) who share a general disposition towards defecation that has endured over time such that it is possible to talk about a British attitude, which may have resonance outside Britain in other parts of Europe and America.

## Taboo Research

I suggested earlier that one of the reasons that defecation has been ignored in anthropology is because of the anthropologists' attitudes toward the subject. In Britain it is the most private of activities not only carried out behind closed doors usually out of sight of even one's closest family, but also a subject that has limited appearance in daily conversation. By being out of sight, defecation can be put out of mind. Aspects of life that are hidden and not spoken about are understood to be taboo, in its common English sense of referring to topics that are shocking, obscene, dangerous or uncomfortable. A search on the title word "taboo" on the British Library or Amazon.co.uk catalogues shows the range of topics considered "taboo" by British and American authors in the late twentieth century – incest and child abuse (Elliott 1993, Search 1988, Rubin and Byerly 1983), male rape (McMullen 1990), cannibalism (Marriner 1992), sado-masochism (Green and Green 1973), menstruation (Houppert 1999), death and dying (McGinley 1999, Cline 1996) and defecation (Sabbath and Hall 1977) – many of which, as the book titles reveal, consider their topic the last or ultimate taboo, the one subject that remains unmentionable in this liberal and immoral modern world.

In anthropology, the concept of taboo describes an "authoritative commandment that is internalised" (Fortes 1966), a moral or ritual injunction the breach of which would be an offence against the ancestors, god or the earth. Taboos prohibit or proscribe certain behaviour, and set apart one people (those who adhere to a taboo) from another (those who do not). Taboo, then, is not to do with propriety sanctioned by embarrassment, but to do with morality sanctioned by mystical retribution and integrity of the lineage. Taboos in which anthropologists have been interested include postpartum sexual intercourse, menstruation, and in particular the killing and eating of totemic animals (Fortes 1966). In common-sense English usage, however, taboo has come to refer principally to discourse as the books listed above show. What is taboo in their subject matter is the mentioning of the unmentionable, rather than the act itself (except perhaps for cannibalism), because these books are presented as bringing out into the open practices that actually go on in private more often than we think. In particular, death, sex and defecation – the three "natural objects of prohibitions" according to Bataille (1993) – are considered taboo topics of

conversation in modern Britain<sup>6</sup>. All three, as Elias (1984) shows (see chapters two and three), have become private and hidden activities carried out away from communal space with the concomitant removal from everyday conversation.

To study a topic that is considered taboo in the sense of unmentionable presents particular difficulties (Lawler 1991: 1). Observation of the act is restricted or prohibited, and finding people willing to talk about it can be difficult. Longhurst (2001) nearly gave up her research on men's use of the bathroom as she found it almost impossible to find men willing to talk in focus groups about the subject. As mentioned above, both the researcher and his or her informants risk being tainted by the breach of a taboo in talking about the subject, and facing social ostracism through spoiling their identity (Goffman 1968b). Researchers studying emotive subjects such as death and dying or incest and rape also have to find ways to deal with the traumatic memories and experiences revealed during the research, both for the researchers themselves and their informants. Researchers studying illness, particularly in relation to issues of continence, also report their difficulties in both asking and writing about such sensitive topics (Seymour 1998).

Studying the everyday experience of defecation, then, would appear similarly difficult. Certainly it appears that the subject is a taboo topic of conversation. A recent article in the Guardian newspaper concluded with the following quote from a colorectal surgeon:

Moving your bowels is a very secretive thing to do, we go into a small room and lock and bolt the door. There is no vocabulary for it so people cannot talk about it. This is virtually the one area of human function left which we don't talk about. Eating food has become a social act, but letting that food out the other end is a total taboo. (E. Crawford 1999: 7).

The American authors of *The Call of Human Nature*, a study of scatology in German literature, start their work with a similar statement:

In today's world of relaxed moral standards and explicit language, the waste products and secretions of our bodies – urine and feces, perspiration and

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<sup>6</sup> As I will go on to discuss, this is not to say that these subjects are *not* spoken about, but that they are considered "unmentionable".



mucus – represent the last real taboo. For readers and theatregoers, the bedroom is chic, but the bathroom is still in dubious taste.

(Rollfinke and Rollfinke 1986: 3)

And in her chapter on how people with physical disabilities deal with their impaired bodily functions, Seymour states that “beyond crude jokes or clinical situations, civilised behaviour provides few opportunities to openly discuss these topics.” (1998: 154)

These three examples from the different fields of media medicine, literature and medical sociology all share the view that talking or writing about shit is prohibited in Western culture, and that this makes the work of the authors (and, implicitly, the lives of Seymour’s informants and the colorectal surgeon’s patients) more difficult. At the same time, though, they are openly discussing the topic themselves. Seymour mentions “crude jokes and clinical situations” in passing, suggesting two ways in which excretion can be discussed. In another example, Farrar starts the foreword to his 1960 publication on constipation with the familiar type of statement that “according to some the subject here in presented would ordinarily be considered in questionable if not bad taste”. Two pages later he bemoans our “constant bombardment” by articles about constipation in magazines or on radio or television, and by doctors’ routine, casual enquiries about the state of the bowels (1960: ix-x), and a few pages further on he comments that “it is not unusual for good friends to bring it [the topic of constipation] up when discussing their common miseries” (1960: 1). Like Seymour, Farrar is also acknowledging that there are opportunities to discuss excretion – clinical situations again, but also through popular media and conversation with friends – while at the same time believing it to be something that isn’t talked about.

Excretion, then, is both not talked about and talked about, or rather as Foucault would say, the discourse on excretion takes particular forms. Foucault (1981) questioned the prevailing view that the Victorians didn’t talk about sex and showed that the idea of sexual repression as a linear move from the more open and frank seventeenth century to the uptight nineteenth was a myth. He showed that in fact it wasn’t that sex was no longer talked about in the repressive eighteenth hundreds but that things were said in a different way (1981: 27). Foucault was trying to

understand why it is that we seem to want “to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence” (1981: 9) when from the evidence it is clear that sex has always been talked about – even during the nineteenth century – especially in religious, educational and medical discourse.

Something similar could be said about excretion. In the course of researching for this thesis I have been amazed at the amount written and spoken about the subject. Excrement and defecation are recurrent themes in literature, art, film and theatre; favourite elements in the stories people tell about their holidays; appear in magazine articles on health and beauty; are central to psychoanalytic theory; have cropped up in many conversations between friends, not necessarily in connection to my studies; and are discussed in holy texts. To some extent all these sources of shit discourse could be subsumed under Seymour’s “crude jokes and clinical situations” – holiday anecdotes are usually told to amuse, for example, and health and beauty articles could be seen as clinical – but if this is the case then her categories seem less restrictive than she implies.

However, even though defecation is spoken about, to do so still has a certain power to shock, sometimes offend and often embarrass, and it is this that is conveyed by labelling the subject “taboo”. The breach of taboo is dangerous. While it may not lead to divine retribution, it can spoil identity and set that person apart as different – as having a psychological problem perhaps (following the Freudian legacy discussed earlier) or being socially inept or barbaric – and potentially dangerous or contaminating. What is taboo about mentioning the unmentionable subject of defecation is to do so in an inappropriate situation, just as defecating itself in an inappropriate place is subject to external and internal prohibition.

Elias (1984) traces the changing ideas of embarrassment and decency in Western Europe to show how first bodily waste itself and then even mention of it came to be relegated to the private sphere (see chapters two and three), such that mere mention of bodily processes in inappropriate circumstances can be a cause of distress. However, what is considered inappropriate is not simply “in front of other people”. Defecation can be mentioned in certain circumstances in front of other people as we have seen above, but it seems that in order to do so, the situation needs to be

demarcated in some way. The appeal to psychoanalysis mentioned above is one technique for this; another is an apology. So, for example, the sixteenth century writer Harington (1962) spends a good deal of his treatise on a new style of close stool apologising for and justifying his subject matter, albeit in a way that in fact pokes fun at the mores of his Elizabethan society. Excremental discourse is similarly bracketed off in everyday conversation. Two examples will illustrate this. Sitting in the kitchen with Anne and Tim one evening, as Tim prepared the meal, the conversation had moved from talking about festivals and camping, to the subject of toilets. Anne started to relate a couple of anecdotes which I discuss later in this thesis which involved mention of excretion. After a few minutes of talking about the subject, she then interrupted herself and said “sorry to talk about this while you’re cooking”, before continuing with her anecdote. My second example comes from a one day NHS workshop on Clinical Governance<sup>7</sup> that I attended as part of my full-time job. The participants (senior managers in the health service) had been split into small groups to produce a visual representation of the role of Clinical Governance in primary care. Our group, amused by the misspelling of “role” as “roll” on the instruction sheet, and rather tired after a long day, decided to represent Clinical Governance as a hamburger being eaten. Taking the analogy to its logical conclusion, one participant started to talk about the end product of eating the hamburger, but was quickly anticipated and interrupted by another participant who told her “don’t go down there” (i.e. do not talk about excrement). We laughed, and another participant who had missed the conversation asked why we were laughing. The two women then repeated their exchange, including the censoring statement.

In both these examples, the apology or censoring statement did not in fact prevent the discussion of excrement but allowed it to take place. Anne continued to talk about defecation, and the participants in the workshop repeated what they had said, even though one of them had explicitly told the other not to talk about it. During the course of my research I noticed that whenever themes of defecation arose at dinner parties or meal times (a surprisingly not infrequent occurrence) someone at the table made a censoring statement or apology, in reference to the juxtaposition of talking about excrement while eating (e.g. “this is a nice thing to be talking about while

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<sup>7</sup> Clinical Governance is the framework for improving quality in the health service.

we're eating!", or "not while we're eating!"), which did not stop the conversation but allowed it to continue. In most cases the person making the censoring statement was female (see chapter five for a discussion on the gendered experience of defecating and talking about defecation). Douglas (1996) argues that all unintended or irrelevant organic processes are screened out of social intercourse, and if not controlled then "formal framing-off procedures enable them to be shorn of their natural meaning and allow the discourse to go on uninterrupted" (1996: 76)<sup>8</sup>. She is talking about processes such as farting or sneezing, but in the examples above the apology or censoring statement served in a similar way to bracket off what would otherwise have been the inappropriate appearance of defecation in discourse.

Other ways in which talk of defecation is framed is within intimacy, discussed in chapter three, as well as the "crude jokes and clinical situations" that Seymour dismissed. Also, of course, this thesis itself and the process of creating it provided appropriate situations in which defecation could be discussed. I was often approached directly by people who were aware of what I was studying, who would come to me with a story or anecdote, or a reference in a film or book, in which they thought I would be interested. I was in this way privileged to information that perhaps people would not normally share, as well as pointed in different directions, and the fact of my research seemed to give people a framework in which to talk about the subject, bracketing it off from the rest of the conversation, but allowing them to share what was often a funny anecdote. Studying defecation in a society that considers the subject taboo, then, was less hard than it first may have appeared.

Nevertheless, there were occasions when the subject matter of my thesis caused me problems. Most of the information gathered from conversations and daily interactions were collected in situations of relative intimacy, in that conversations in which the topic arose were among friends and this intimacy seemed to preclude embarrassment. In other circumstances, however, I felt embarrassed about what I was studying, particularly in formal situations where I did not feel comfortable bringing up the subject of shit, where the subject certainly felt taboo. This

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<sup>8</sup> What is considered unintended or irrelevant can vary from society to society (so belching or spitting, for example, may be part of discourse in some societies and therefore not bracketed off or ignored).

embarrassment in itself is important to recognise as a culturally appropriate reaction to what I was doing, because as I will argue in chapter three an important aspect of our constitution of what it is to excrete is that this is a private and *intimate* activity and the appearance of shit in non-intimate relationships is disturbing.

Intimate relationships include those between close friends, between clinical professionals and their patients, between parents and their children, and between comedians and their audience, and in these situations embarrassment is less apparent. Times when I felt most embarrassed were with people who, for one reason or another, I had a non-intimate relationship with, and where I was uncertain of their acceptance of my topic as a valid area of research (and of my identity as a valid researcher). Hadolt (1999) describes a similar difficulty that he experienced while writing his article on the Kolig debate. When discussing his article with work colleagues, he found that:

Our conversations always started with a cautious, sometimes nervous mutual appraisal of attitudes and opinions, which concerned not so much the topic of shit itself, but first of all talking about shit. We lowered our voices, looked around for others who might possibly overhear us and hesitated when it came to saying the word *Scheiße* (shit) out loud. Only when we had agreed that *Scheiße* is a topic worthy of academic discussion, did the atmosphere of the talk relax. what we did in these first moments was to create a certain distance from shit as matter and from its usual connotations of dirt and disgust by transforming it into an academic topic. In contrast to kinship or religion, where I never had such a problem, shit is obviously not a common topic for academic discussion. (1999: 180-81)

While there was clearly a negotiation going on here around the legitimacy of excretion as an academic topic and, as Hadolt says, a process of distancing, his description of the lowering of voices and ensuring exclusion of others suggests that this negotiation involved the creation of an intimate relationship (however temporary) between the colleagues which was both created by talking about shit and also allowed it to be talked about at all. My own embarrassment was similarly negotiated, and in situations in which an intimate relationship was not going to be established I sometimes distanced myself further by being non-specific about what I

was studying, describing it as “the anthropology of the body”, or “about things coming in and out of the body”.

### Excremental language

If there are problems in talking about defecation, there are also problems in writing about it. The power of taboo subjects to offend or shock is reflected in the disproportionate number of words available to describe them. Sex, defecation and death all have enormous numbers of euphemisms compared with other bodily functions such as eating or sleeping. Broadly, in modern English, these fall into four categories: the formal or scientific, the vulgar, the childish, and the euphemistic. We select each time the word or phrase that seems most able to express our meaning, whether that is to avoid embarrassment, to be precise and unambiguous, or to shock.

What is inappropriate means, like Douglas’s idea of dirt, what is out of place in a particular context. In writing this thesis, childish, vulgar or euphemistic terms seem out of place in an academic text which is written in a formal and structured style, to be read by adult scholars. Therefore it seems more appropriate to use formal or scientific terms such as *defecation*, *elimination*, *stools*, or *excrement*, than it does to write about *poo*, *shit* or *number two*. However, as Meyer (1994) writes in the foreword to *How to Shit in the Woods*, “studding an entire book with *urination*, *defecation*, *elimination*, and *stools* seemed depressingly clinical” (1994: xv). Meyer’s book, of course, is intended for a popular audience rather than an academic one, and therefore her concern not to be “depressingly clinical” is to avoid alienating or boring a popular readership. An academic text, such as this, does not have this concern although there can be problems of understanding in using formal or technical language which can also alienate a more academic readership. Hadolt (1999) recalls being stumped by reading the phrase “*Hab ich defäziert?*” (“Did I defecate?”) in a description of a birth among the Eipo by Schiefenhövel:

In order to avoid the obscene meaning of ‘shitting’ he ended up using a highly scientific word which nobody would use in ordinary speech. I remember that I had to look up *defäzieren* in the dictionary for its meaning when I read this passage ten years ago. That I still remember this quotation

after so many years also speaks for the oddity of this expression. (1999: 196n)

Although words like defecation are perhaps more familiar to English speakers than their German equivalents are to German speakers, there is a risk of alienating the reader. When I first started looking into the topic of body products I was confused by the word *micturition* which is, like *defäkieren*, not used in ordinary speech, and Frankenberg recalls being baffled as a young man by the word *ordure* in a biology text book (personal communication).

If we nevertheless accept that there are formal words that are familiar to most readers, there is still the issue of how meaningful it is to use these words to describe an activity that is described by the informants in more prosaic or euphemistic terms. One of the most commonly used words was *poo*, which while not considered vulgar, is a slang word with particularly childish associations. *Poo* is an inoffensive but unambiguous word and at times I have found it appropriate to use; for example, I have told people in casual conversation that I am studying “the anthropology of poo”, aware of the amusing and surprising effect of the unexpected juxtaposition of the scientific with the childish. In spite of its frequency of use, however, childish words, like euphemisms, are little used in written form.

The words used in conversations and interviews were related to the circumstances of my research which was mainly among people who are familiar enough with each other to use words that they may not use in more formal context. This was clearly illustrated by a work colleague who was telling me about a conversation she had been involved in at a dinner party. “Poo”, she said, had been “the major topic of conversation”, and she related the various things that had been said, using the word *poo* throughout<sup>9</sup>. One part of her account referred to a story about a homeless alcoholic in a cinema who had soiled himself. As she started to relate this part of her story, a colleague walked into the room and Helen changed her use of language on

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<sup>9</sup> This may be because she is a mother and this is the word she uses around her children. Also, as I said above, “poo” is an inoffensive word and by using this word when relating what could be regarded as an offensive conversation she does not seem disgusting, but innocent and childlike. It is as if the poo does not stick to her when she talks about it.

his entrance, saying that the man had been *incontinent faecally*. Although she had not interrupted her narrative, hesitated or lowered her voice when our colleague entered, this change in language perhaps reflected an awareness of the potential inappropriateness of our conversation. *Incontinent faecally* is a more medical or scientific term, more in keeping with the fact that our office at the time was in a hospital. Using this term served to reconfigure our conversation into scientific discourse. From my knowledge of Helen and our work situation, I suspected that our colleague entering the office at this point was the reason that she used this term, and later she confirmed this, saying that had Simon not walked in at that point she would probably have said “pooed himself” or “shat himself”.

The most commonly used word of all was *shit*, an old word traced back in the Oxford English Dictionary to the Old English *scítan*, with definition examples from written texts from the year 1000. However, as the OED announces at the beginning of its definitions of *shit* as both noun and verb, the word is “not now in decent use”. *Shit* means excrement and to defecate, but is also used as a contemptuous epithet to describe a person or thing of little worth, or to mean rubbish. Sabbath and Hall in *End Product: The First Taboo* (1977), a remarkable romp through what they term “anthroscatology”, are criticised in the preface to their book by Abby Rockefeller for using the word *shit* “as if this were the “real” word and therefore respectable” (1977: 2). She considers it to be an intrinsically denigrating word, the “language of loathing” because of the way the word is used as a negative epithet. Hadolt, on the other hand, chooses to use the word *shit* but asks the reader to disassociate the negative meanings from the functional:

Since the meaning of texts is of course produced between text and reader, the lack of a suitable language also requires the reader to be open to alternative meanings in order to transcend the conventional connotations of *shit*. (1999: 181).

As Meyer says, in justification of her use of the word, “For all its subtleties of meaning, this word is extremely unambiguous. *Shit*, in fact, is one of the least misunderstood words in use today.” (1994: xvii).

The fact that I feel it necessary to include a discussion on use of language is itself indicative of the power of the word *shit*. I am in effect justifying my use of what may



be considered an offensive word in a way that anthropologists using indigenous words that are foreign to the reader are unlikely to do. In the end I chose to use this word alongside the more formal synonyms because it was the word most often used in daily conversation to describe ones own acts as well as the product. Its double meaning as noun and verb also makes it a convenient way to convey both senses simultaneously.

### **Collecting data**

As I mentioned above, my method and theoretical approach in carrying out and writing up this research was to approach the material from an embodied perspective, that is, by being attentive to the performance of defecation in daily life (by which I do not mean observing other people in the act, but in the way they have embodied and talk about their embodiment of the act). Like all fieldwork, of course, this entailed writing down observations, conversations and experiences as they occurred in the course of field work, as well as noting references to relevant themes as I came across them in newspapers, magazines, books, television and film. These were not sought out, but stumbled upon in my daily life. At the same time through more formal literature reviews I was reading a wide range of academic and literary texts – from psychoanalytic literature to medical history, and from child care books to seventeenth century diaries – which broadened the scope and took me off in different directions. As well as this, I carried out several semi-structured interviews with mothers of young children about toilet training, and with other people about their experiences of excretion which allowed me to focus in on particular ideas, and through a dialogic process of discussions with my supervisors, fellow students and friends (face to face and by e-mail) more information and new ideas were created.

All of the experiences and expressions that I have collected, whether uttered in my presence, read, observed or experienced by myself, have informed the direction of this thesis. This style of research could be considered “abductive” or a process of “hypothetic inference”, following Frankenberg and Robinson’s unpublished paper on “research without categories”. Referring to the ideas of the nineteenth century logician C. S. Peirce, they describe abduction as a method of reasoning that looks for relationships between phenomena without being constrained by categories.

Essentially it involves making comparisons between the appearance and sequencing of phenomena but in very lateral ways. By not only paying special attention to sequences of unusual events which may be explicitly considered to be in association with each to other, but far more by paying attention to those rich but apparently socially subliminal ordinary associations of everyday life which, by their ordinariness, usually escape our gaze, we can draw important inferences about relationships in social life. (Frankenberg and Robinson, forthcoming)

This method takes as part of the fieldwork process itself the embodied experiences of the researcher in their dialogue with their research which allows the possibility of “exploring the potentials in situations” as they arise, even where they do not seem to be obviously related to the original focus of research.

This approach has led to the inclusion of historical material in the analysis, and although my focus is, as I have said, defecation in *contemporary* Britain, I make frequent reference to earlier periods in British history. It is important to make clear, however, that this thesis is not presenting a history of defecation or privacy or a history of toilets. Historical material is included in order to inform the discussion of the contemporary material. Through a process of hypothetic inference, links emerged between different strands of fieldwork findings, and ideas that started as unconnected began to connect up in sometimes startling ways. The links in chapter four, for example, between late nineteenth/early twentieth century ideas of autointoxication, catharsis and confession with ideas of emotions, with their resonances into late twentieth century experience and echoes in early modern forms of embodiment, were made through following up conversations, footnotes, asides and hunches rather than sticking to a focus on modern Britain. There is nothing really radical in this approach; it is, as Frankenberg and Robinson say, what most of us do most of the time, but what they are stressing is that often the inferences are discarded as irrelevant to the research category. It is only when the researcher does not limit his or her research to the narrow focus of a particular frame of vision that he or she is able to respond to the opportunities and potentialities that present themselves.

As I argue in the next chapter, following Toren (1999) in particular, people are both producers and products of history because they are born into a world that already

exists but also bring the world into existence for themselves through their participation in it. The language we use is a good example of this and while the meaning and use of words changes dynamically over time, the subliminal persistence of earlier meanings can be informative. Take the word *humour*, for example, which is linked to defecation in the modern notion of *toilet humour* but also in the early modern notion of defecation as the expulsion of unwanted humours from the body (see chapter four). While *humour* may have become an abstract term, it once referred to a material substance and while this sense may have become lost to us we continue to use expressions (such as “it makes my blood boil” to refer to our anger, or describing someone as phlegmatic, wet or drippy if they are sluggish and unexcitable) that imply a subliminal persistence of a material understanding or even experience. The inclusion of material from earlier periods of history, then, is part of the research process of building a picture of modern British experience of defecation; part of the process towards understanding how we become who we are. An embodied approach to understanding recognises that not only do we constitute ourselves and our meanings through active participation in daily life and our relationships with other people, but that the conditions into which we are born are constituted over time.

### **Framework of the thesis**

My approach to defecation as a meaningful and social human activity, is through the work on embodiment which considers people as embodied agents acting and making meaning in and of their worlds through their relationships with other people. In the next chapter I explain in more detail what I mean by this through an overview of the theories that have informed this work. This chapter sets the theoretical framework for the thesis, as well as presenting what I consider to be the four major Western theories of defecation. Freud, Elias, Bakhtin and Douglas pervade this thesis and my discussion of their work in chapter two is intended to give a brief synopsis of their theories along with the limitations of their ideas for a consideration of the *embodied experience* of defecation. To overcome their limitations, and to allow for a more culturally phenomenological account, I turn instead to the ideas of Frankenberg, V. Turner and Goffman to consider defecation as a performative act. Defecation as cultural performance sees this act as both a means to an end (a way to move from discomfort to comfort in a socially appropriate way) and as meaningful and

expressive (in that it takes place within – as well as creating anew – relationships with other people).

This, then, is the approach I take in the next three chapters where I consider defecation as it is performed in modern Britain through the major themes emerging from my research into British excretory experience. These are; that it is a private activity performed out of sight of other people; that it offers pleasurable sensations of release and internal purity; and that people are ambivalent about both the act and the products and that this ambivalence is used to powerful effect in Western art and literature. These three aspects are interrelated and together make up modern British experience; it is not, as Elias implied, that excretion is a natural act increasingly imposed upon by culture, but that it is always already performed in a culturally appropriate way from the moment of birth. In modern Britain people are born into a time and place where excretion is a hidden and intimate activity, welcomed as a way of relief from discomfort, but troublesome as a potentially embarrassing and awkward activity and simultaneously valued and reviled as a rich source of humour and artistic expression.

Chapters three and four focus on the daily experiences of defecating. In chapter three, I consider the constitution of defecation as private through the discomfort at being seen by others as well as the pleasure of taking time out to defecate, the preference for using one's own facilities as well as the considerations involved in using public toilets, and changing historical ideas of privacy from childhood through school and into adulthood. Privacy and intimacy are shown to be historically constituted ideas which have changed over time since the seventeenth century partly through the process of the management of bodily products. While defecation has become the most private of activities, however, I also show that it is also an intimate activity that can be shared with others in particular circumstances. Defecation can, in fact, create bonds of intimacy precisely because it is constituted as a private activity.

While chapter three focuses on the environments and relationships within which defecation takes place, the next chapter focuses on the sensations and understandings of bodily functioning through a discussion of the pleasurable sensations of defecating, the similarity to other forms of releasing – expressing emotion, telling

secrets etc – as well as the dangers of constipation or blockages. This chapter is, in some ways, a balance to the views of Elias and Douglas who stress the social pressures to contain bodily products. While there is clearly an imperative to hide one's excreta from others in the modern West, there is also an imperative to open up to others in order to form meaningful relationships. The idea of emotional expression as the release of something from inside is shown to be part of the same embodied process as the felt need to let matter out of the body. This is linked back to the end of the nineteenth century where ideas of autointoxication and psychoanalysis emerged simultaneously, both arguing that what is inside and not released will build up and cause harm; and back further to the seventeenth century where the humoral body (in which the build up of material substances in the body could unbalance well being of mind, body and soul) continued to function within a society in which the mind was increasingly being experienced as separate to the body.

Chapters three and four both show the experience of defecation to be a source of ambivalence in modern Britain through the historical constitution of the act as private and as a cause of both comfort and discomfort. In chapter five I turn from embodied experience to the representation of defecation and excrement in the Western imagination to show the ambiguous ways in which the subject is represented as both worthless *and* valuable, both low and degrading *and* deep and meaningful. The purpose of considering the representations of defecation is to show how the ambiguous images in popular iconography are a part of the total experience of shitting, and in particular play a part in the constitution of it as a gendered act and as a source of humour. We are born into a world which already exists, and our understanding and experience of excrement and defecation develops within these already existing representations.

In the conclusion, these themes are brought together to show how the ability (or inability) to control the performance of defecation occupies a major part of daily life in modern Britain and functions in the constitution of the sense of identity and relationships with other people. Using the material discussed in chapters three to five, I turn back in the conclusion to the ideas of performance discussed in chapter two. In particular, Victor Turner's ideas of liminality are used to illuminate the ambiguity of defecation in terms of presenting a *freedom from* (the sight of other

people, and social obligation) as well as a *freedom to* (enjoy solitude, create art and express feelings). However, the control of performance is also discussed as crucial for the understanding of defecation in modern Britain and the extent to which any act is experienced as pleasurable or troublesome is, to a large extent, determined by the amount of control that a person feels they have over what they are doing. This is very much within the persisting Western mind/body dualism; defecation seems to be the epitome of potential conflict between the mind and the body, such as where the body wants to defecate but the mind won't let it because of embarrassment or disgust, or where the mind wants to defecate but the body won't let it such as when, uncomfortably constipated, a person may *will* the body, unsuccessfully, to defecate. In more extreme cases, as writers on disability and illness show, the conflict can lead to a kind of self-hatred as a person seems to lose control over their own body and its release of bodily products. At the same time, there are occasions when a person will deliberately defecate in a seemingly inappropriate situation, but rather than experiencing a failed performance in Goffman's terms, he or she is in control. It is not, therefore, the ability to keep body products out of sight and hidden *per se* that defines appropriate defecation, but the capacity to control how and when they are released and contained.

# Chapter 2 – From Body Products to Embodied Processes

## Introduction

It is a fact of our existence as humans that we have a material presence in the world and are in social relationships with other material humans. However, while physical structure and environmental factors may impose universal constraints, limits or possibilities, the ways in which human embodied existence is experienced and understood varies across cultures and histories.

The fact of our physicality has meant that anthropologists engaged in fieldwork have always been studying the physical presence of people in social relationships, whether or not they theorised embodiment in their analyses. Over the last 20 years there has been a more self-conscious focus on the body in anthropology as well as the related disciplines of sociology, psychology, history, feminist theory and philosophy, amid the accusation that the body has been neglected in these fields because of our Western dualistic separation of the body and the mind. However, as several overviews of theories of “the body” have shown, concerns about corporeality lie “deeply buried” at the heart of most social theorists from Marx to Durkheim and from Weber to Nietzsche, forming a “secret history of the body” (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 2, B. Turner 1991: 12).

There is so much written about the body that several theorists have usefully grouped the theories according to how they approach human corporeality. Frank (1990) divided the literature into four categories each of which addressed a type of body: *medicalized, sexual, disciplined* and *talking*. Later, he reformulated this into a theoretical framework which addressed how bodies deal with their own embodiment in terms of control, desire and how they relate to themselves and others (1991). Csordas (1994a) summarises the various approaches to the “anthropology of the body” into three groups: a focus on the “analytic body” (considering the body in terms of its perceptions, practices, parts, processes or products), the “topical body”

(considering the body in relation to particular cultural activities such as “body and health” or “body and gender”), and the “multiple body” (such as Douglas’ two bodies, Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s three, or O’Neill’s five). Williams and Bendelow (1998) discuss social theories of the body in terms of whether they are concerned with the problem of bodily order (the body as a problem for society) or bodily control (the body as a problem for itself).

However, all these approaches, says Csordas, “study the *body* and its transformations while still taking *embodiment* for granted” (1994: 6). By this he means that they start with “the body” as an already objectified and bounded object to be studied in its relationship to an already bounded society. This was reiterated by Frankenberg (2000b) at a paper given to the London Medical Sociology group in July 2000 where he argued that approaches which take “the body” as given fail to consider human embodiment as continually transforming processes and so cannot adequately theorise corporeal existence.

In the first part of this chapter I will briefly review some of the theories of the body and embodiment which provide useful insights for approaching bodily processes and products in general. Taking Csordas’ and Frankenberg’s comments as the starting point for my discussion on theories of corporeality, I divide the theories into two approaches: one which takes the body as a culturally constructed object to be theorised about, and the other which considers embodiment as a process within which humans are always becoming as persons. Focusing on embodiment rather than the body provides a more useful approach for considering how a process such as defecation is experienced and constituted as meaningful by living persons, although the insights of some of the body theorists are also useful in the consideration of the representation of the body particularly in relation to the symbolism of excrement. This section is deliberately brief, and I refer to fuller and more comprehensive reviews by Williams and Bendelow (1998), Frank (1991) and Csordas (1994a) for a more complete discussion. In the second part of this chapter I will look more specifically at those theorists (Freud, Elias, Bakhtin and Douglas) who focused on defecation and consider their ideas in the light of the theories of embodiment and theories of performance.



## From Anthropology of the Body to Embodiment as a Paradigm<sup>10</sup>

One of the first to explicitly discuss the body in anthropology was Mauss (1992) who, in his paper on techniques of the body (written in 1934), tried to theorise how people “know how to use their bodies” in culturally specific ways. The body, argued Mauss, is “man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time his first technical means” (1992: 461). He shows, with many examples, the culturally specific ways people have of walking, running, sleeping, eating etc (sadly, under the heading “hygiene in the needs of nature” he tantalisingly writes that “here I could list innumerable facts for you” but fails, in fact, to do so). He clumsily refers to his various examples as “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions” (1992: 473) to express the need for a “triple viewpoint”, that is a combination of psychological, sociological and biological explanations, to understand any mode of action.

The constant adaptation to a physical, mechanical or chemical aim (for example, when we drink) is pursued in a series of assembled actions, and assembled for the individual not by himself alone but by all his education, by the whole society to which he belongs, in the place he occupies. (1992: 462)

His paper challenges any idea that any of our actions are natural or innate, and called for a more focused approach to a theory of the body by any student of human action.

Mauss’s call was taken up by Douglas (1996) in *Natural Symbols* in which she proposed a theory of the body which she claims to be universally applicable according to several basic rules. Following Durkheim and Mauss in asserting that “the social relation of men provide the prototype for the logical relations between things”, she argues in the first pages of her introduction that people classify and order their world because they live in groups. It is society that is the first scheme of nature, not the individual (1996: xxxi-ii). Society and the individual person present two bodies, with the former constraining the latter:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories

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<sup>10</sup> This title refers to *Anthropology of the Body* (Blacking 1977) and *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology* (Csordas 1990)

through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. (Douglas 1996: 69)

*Natural Symbols* is a study on ritual which Douglas takes to be, above all, a form of communication which transmits culture through social relations (1996: 21-22). Considering ritual and the body as two media of expression, she then turns to language (a more obvious medium of expression) and applies Bernstein's theories (developed from Sapir) on how speech and language control the experience of culture. Bernstein's theory stated that there are parallels between structures of control within the family and the way people communicate which is directly related to the division of labour in industrialised society. He defined two ways of communicating. Restricted speech is limited to a specific local environment where speakers share the same assumptions and where the purpose of communication is to maintain social solidarity. Elaborated speech on the other hand is used in wider social situations where speakers do not necessarily hold the same beliefs and assumptions, and where communication is to allow individuals to express their unique perceptions. Bernstein found from his research in London in the 1960s that corresponding to these two forms of speech there were two kinds of family role systems. Some families controlled children's behaviour through appeal to their role in society (referring to their age, sex, position in the family etc), while other families appealed to their child's feelings and the feelings of those around him or her. The different forms of speech (restricted and elaborated) and different forms of family control (positional and personal) are both produced from the same social pressures.

Douglas developed Bernstein's ideas of speech and control within the family into a theory of social control along two dimensions: the extent to which there is pressure to conform to the demands of the group, and the extent to which classification systems are shared. She calls these dimensions group and grid respectively. Within this framework, she plots different groups of people and social systems according to how constrained they are in terms of other people and basic assumptions about the world, relating this to their ideas of ritual and symbolic behaviour, and from this to the uses of the body.

If the pattern of social relations put their stamp upon speech forms, as Bernstein's work shows, they no doubt put a pattern upon non-verbal forms

of communication as well. If the speech forms thus produced themselves control the kind of social responses possible in a given social environment, we should expect the usage of the body for communication to exert a parallel constraint. (1996: 68)

The body, she argues, is a restricted medium of expression: “the form it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways” (1996: 69). As a restricted medium of expression, Douglas analyses the body in the same way as she does ritual or speech in that her first rule – the rule of concordance – states that there is a drive to achieve consonance at all levels of experience and across all media of expression. Breaks in concordance (for example, laughing at a funeral) are disturbing just as it is satisfying where there is “consonance in layer after layer of experience and context after context” (1996: 74). Her second rule is that the possible ways of using the body are controlled by the social system because, as an image of society, “there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension” (1996: 74). Bodily control, she asserts, is an expression of social control.

Douglas, having posited two rules, proceeds to propose two more: that strong social control demands strong bodily control; and that the stronger the pressure to control the body, the more the forms of expression are disembodied, by which she means that unintended or irrelevant organic processes (such as the casting-off of waste products) are screened out of social intercourse. She calls this last rule the purity rule, and deriving from it are two physical dimensions for expressing social distance – front is more respectful than back, and distance between bodies is more formal than nearness. In this, Douglas finds “an ordered pattern ...in the apparently chaotic variation between diverse cultures” (1996: 76). With this set of rules, she is then able to explain bodily behaviour in terms of the specific social situation in which the behaviour takes place, for example to explain why possession and trance take particular forms in particular societies. Later in this chapter I will consider in more detail the implications of Douglas’ ideas for studying bodily products.

Douglas’ statement that “the physical body is a microcosm of society” (1996:76) echoes the ancient Western image of the body as a microcosm of the universe. The Greek theory was that the whole of the cosmos was represented in small in the

individual body and its organs ruled the functions just as society was ruled by the heads of state. Added to this framework in the Middle Ages was a Christian formulation which included God and Christ (Le Goff 1989:16) so that God ruled in Heaven, as the King ruled in society and the Heart ruled in the body. This was a world divided into a hierarchy in which all parts were essential to the functioning of the whole, and all parts knew their place in that whole. Donne, the great metaphysical poet of the early seventeenth century, wrote that

the *Heart* alone is in the *Principalitie*, and in the *Throne*, as *King*, the rest as *Subjects*, though in eminent *Place*, and *Office*, must contribute to that, as *Children* to their *Parents*, as all persons to all kinds of *Superiours*, bee not of stronger parts, than them selves, that serve and obey them that are weaker (Donne 1936[1624]:525)

That this was not just a poetic use of metaphor is shown in medical works of the same period such as this from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*

As first of the *Head* in which the Animal Organes are contained, and Braine it selfe, which by his Nerves gives sense and motion to the rest, and is (as it were) a privy Councillour, and Chancellour to the *Heart*. The second Region is the Chest, or middle *Belly*, in which the heart as king keepes his court, and by his Arteries communicates life to the whole body." (Burton 1989[1651]: 143-144)

It is no coincidence that Douglas, Burton and Donne appear to be saying the same thing. The strong Western tradition of the body representing society and society representing the body is just as evident in our day-to-day language as it was four hundred years ago. However whereas for Donne and Burton the structures of society and the body are given (ordained by God), for Douglas only the body is a given. That is, Douglas' theory is based on diversity across the world between societies that organise and classify themselves and others in particular various ways, but in all societies, she argues, will be seen the concerns and controls of society reflected in the bodies of the members of those societies. The body is always an object which is subject to social control, and we must argue back from what we know about the particular dangers to a social group in order to understand the significance of any particular bodily action. The idea of the body as microcosm for Douglas, then, is not a description of how any person experiences his or her body, but a way of

understanding how a society orders its world. Burton and Donne, in contrast, were describing living bodies as they were perceived by themselves and those around them.

Douglas' theory is criticised for presenting bodies as static objects manipulated by society to serve its own needs (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 28). It is not clear from Douglas how change over time occurs if bodies are constrained by the social order. The problem is that, as Douglas herself states in her earlier book (Douglas 1984), she is interested in the body as a social object, not as an experiencing subject. A much more dynamic approach to bodies, that allows for change over time while still following Durkheim's distinction between society and the individual, is provided in the work of Mellor and Shilling (1997), who develop the idea of forms or modes of embodiment to refer to the particular forms of corporeal solidarity that allow society to exist. Like Douglas, they take their starting point from Durkheim but emphasise and develop his ideas of collective effervescence – that is, that “the creation and evolution of different forms of human community are intimately related to the immanence of powerful passions and emotions of a collective, sacred character” (1997:1) – to consider how society changes over time. It is not possible to understand forms of sociality (the main focus of sociology) without considering the forms of embodiment that allow human interaction to take place at all.

Mellor and Shilling trace changing forms of embodiment in Western history as a way to greater insight into the development of the modern world. They focus on three reformations of bodies; the Catholic reformation of medieval bodies, the Protestant reformation of the Catholic body, and the baroque modern form that emerged along with the Counter-Reformation. These ideal types as forms of embodiment are shown to develop gradually and interdependently as co-existent ways of being-in-the-world, and are intended as analogous to Marx's modes of production, in that they describe dominant structures and processes which underlay the organisation of a society without implying that they refer to every person in that society. Their formulation of three forms of embodiment dominating Western European experience for the last eight hundred years or so is crucial for understanding contemporary British experience. Catholicism in the medieval period restructured pagan peoples' immersion in their environment by providing a sensuous engagement with the sacred

as immanent in their surrounding world. People knew their world through their physical engagement in it, and through the involvement of all their senses. Protestantism, in its emphasis of the word of God over ritual and of the mind over the body, abstracted people from their surroundings and introduced the possibility of experiencing body as separate from mind. Knowledge came to be something increasingly cognitive rather than carnal, a phenomenon of a mind separate from a body. The Catholic Counter-Reformation reacted against Protestant asceticism and emphasised instead a “voluptuous corporeality” realised through baroque art and sensuality. “The somatic experience of the sacred”, Mellor and Shilling write, “arises out of these transformations, and expresses a corporeal solidarity between people which can bind them into particular sectional groups, or into the social collectivity as a whole.” (1997: 1). They follow Durkheim’s assertion that the very possibility of society depends on people being incorporated into “this corporeal experience of solidarity”.

Like Douglas, Mellor and Shilling’s argument is based on a separation between individual and society in which bodies were “re-formed” by the needs of religion. They write, for example, that “the medieval Church sought to *manage* the immersion of people with the natural and supernatural world” (1997: 39, original emphasis) and that “the emphasis placed on the word can be seen as part of a Protestant attempt to control the body” (1997: 43). However, the Church and the Protestant reformers are embodied people rather than abstract forces, using the experiences of the people around them to promote their teachings. Thus, they argue, the Catholic Church did not try to eradicate the grotesque manifestations of paganism that resisted control and hierarchy, but instead “directed them towards the effervescent experiences of religious issues through the Church’s organisation of carnival” (1997: 64). In contrast, the doctrines and practices created by the leaders of the Protestant reformation “made it difficult for believers to make positive sense of their passions, emotions and desires ... but they [emotions] continued to ‘race round’ the body and caused growing concern and anxiety whenever they ‘bubbled up’ to obstruct rational thought” (1997: 99). Mellor and Shilling show how the Protestant reformers dealt with this difficulty through its teachings, but how the persistence of the sensual experience of the sacred meant that there was always a Catholic challenge to the Protestant bodily re-formation. This sensual challenge is central to their idea of the

Baroque Modern body which characterises contemporary embodiment, in which the “banal associations” of the Protestant Modern form are experienced alongside the sensual solidarity characteristic of the Counter-Reformation.

Mellor and Shilling’s argument, therefore, allows for embodied experience to be at the centre of an analysis of social change. It considers bodies as it were from the inside as well as the outside, as embodying history and culture as well as creating it, rather than as merely a representation of society. Douglas, interested only in how the body symbolised or represented the society which formed it, could only consider experience (as far as she considered it at all) as constituted by the way the body is represented; for her, it is through representation that experience is known (that is, because a particular society is concerned with external threats to its integrity and purity, for example, it represents the body as a beleaguered fortress and so enforces strict rules about the entrances and exits of the body which will thus effect how the body is experienced). The way a person behaves, speaks or dresses, she argues, tells us something about social rules rather than subjective experience. As Csordas (1999) writes, this approach has particular consequences for analysis, giving the example from his own field of comparative religion; “it makes quite a difference whether one is dealing with religious symbols or religious experience” (1999:146). Mellor and Shilling’s approach is an attempt to deal with both religious symbols and experience through considering how religious movements – made up of embodied persons – both manipulate and are influenced by collective experiences of the sacred. As Csordas wrote, “It is when we begin to think of the body as being-in-the-world that we find ourselves no longer interested in “the body” per se, but in embodiment as an existential condition.” (1999: 147).

Mellor and Shilling’s idea of forms of embodiment which are re-formed over time is an important development in our understanding of the history of Britain. However, it is descriptive rather than theoretical, describing different ways of being in the world but not theorising embodiment itself. The fact of bodies is taken for granted, as is the fact of society. In anthropology, the confrontation with different cultures where the idea of the individual body, the body as an object, the body in society etc., may not exist, has required anthropologists to theorise embodiment from a perspective that does not take the body as a given. Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) outline several

alternative concepts of embodiment in different cultures which challenge the Western ideas (1987: 13-16), and Csordas (1994a: 6-7; 1999: 143) gives as a useful example a conversation between the anthropologist and missionary Maurice Leenhardt and an indigenous New Caledonian man. Leenhardt suggested to the man that Europeans had brought his people the idea of “spirit”, but the man disagreed and said that in fact what the Europeans had introduced to them was the idea of “the body” (Csordas, 1999:143-145). Leenhardt interpreted the discussion between them as meaning that before the Europeans introduced the idea, the body “had no existence of its own, nor specific name to distinguish it” suggesting that the body was neither a subject of experience nor an object of discourse for the New Caledonians. For them, physicality was just a support, nothing more. Csordas’ example shows that while on the one hand it is true to say that all humans have a material presence it is not necessarily useful to talk about “the body” as a taken for granted object because “[o]f course we have bodies, but there are multiple modes of embodiment and styles of bodily objectification that are critical for the understanding of culture.” (1999:145).

Csordas’ approach to embodiment is derived from the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) who took as a starting point our being-in-the-world, that is our bodily experience in which it is through our perception of our already existing world that we can have any objects at all, including a body. The world starts off for us as something we experience subjectively, that is, we live it as ready-made or already there. It is never, however, pre-cultural because we are always born into pre-existing relationships.

The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. ... we exist in both ways *at once*. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 453)

Whereas Douglas saw the body as a medium for expressing the world, for Merleau-Ponty, our body is our medium for *having* a world in the first place. Consciousness is not a matter of “I think that” but of “I can”, in that it is through our embodiment that we have intentionality (1962: 137); all consciousness is consciousness of something and “consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body.”

A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its ‘world’, and to move one’s body is to aim at things



through it; ...Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 138-9)

Dreyfuss and Dreyfuss (1999) draw out of Merleau-Ponty three ways in which the material structure of our bodies determines “what shows up in our world” (1999: 104). They use the example of a chair which for us affords sitting, but only because of the structure of our body (that we get tired, that our knees bend), because we have learned to sit, and because we are brought up to sit on chairs (in traditional Japan, they suggest, chairs would not solicit sitting). This is, they say, the intentional arc which Merleau-Ponty said “projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation.... It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility” (1962: 136). This, then, is a theory that incorporates as central Mauss’s appeal to “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages”.

Csordas develops Merleau-Ponty’s ideas into what he calls a *cultural phenomenology* which is “concerned with synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed” (1999: 143). For Csordas, the body – our material existence – is the existential ground of culture and self and it is through our lived experience that we bring ourselves and culture into being as objects. Csordas offers Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “being-in-the-world” as an alternative to the idea of representation.

The distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy.”

(Csordas 1994a: 10)

In his analysis of Dan, a Navajo man with a brain tumour (1994b, 1999: 156-157) he presents the neurological explanations and the religious explanations as “forms of objectification or representation” which come after Dan’s embodied experience of illness, headache, loss of speech etc. The significance of the number four for the Navajo, for example, gave an order to Dan’s experience of being ill. Following three discrete events in which he lost consciousness, and which led up to his hospitalisation and diagnosis, he expected a fourth which would kill him which influenced how he responded to his illness. Csordas calls the ritual importance of

fourness “the schema that preobjectively ordered” Dan’s experience; it was “the social that Dan carried about with him as a feature of his embodied existence” (1994: 282). By making embodiment, being-in-the-world, or lived experience, the starting point, Csordas is able to avoid becoming stuck in choosing between a neurological or cultural explanation of Dan’s experience.

This need to collapse dualities between mind/body, society/individual, biology/culture etc. is a driving force in current Western cultural analysis. As Mellor and Shilling showed, an aspect of the Protestant re-formation of Western embodiment was the abstraction of the mind from the body. The possibility of doing this is, according to Leder (1990), a function of embodied experience: “While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence” (1990: 1) – for example, the eye cannot see itself when it is in the act of seeing, we are unaware of the workings of many of our internal organs. At the same time, our body often seizes our attention when it is not functioning “we then experience the body as the very *absence* of a desired or ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self” (1990: 2). It is possible therefore (but mistaken, says Leder) for us to separate the mind from the body and to see them as opposed to each other, and to disparage bodily experience because it often signals illness or pain; it is precisely our embodied experience that supported the Cartesian dualist perspective. However, this understanding of embodiment is not inevitable but is “a product of its specific sociohistorical context” (1990: 150)

Cartesian-style dualism is thus never an invariant, phenomenologically compelled by the structure of the lived body. However, the structure of embodiment does give rise to experiences that lend such a doctrine seeming support. Cartesian dualism thus rests upon what I will term a *phenomenological vector*. (Leder 1990: 150)

By “phenomenological vector” he means “a structure of experience that makes possible and encourages the subject in certain practical or interpretive directions, while never mandating them as invariants” (1990: 150). A phenomenological vector “involves an ambiguous set of possibilities and tendencies that take on definite shape only within a cultural context. ...The body’s practices and self-interpretations are always already shaped by culture” (1990: 151), culture, of course, always being shaped in response to corporeal needs and desires.

Leder describes this process by which corporeal experience is reinforced by and reinforces culture as a “positive feedback loop”. Toren (1999), collapsing the dualities further, argues that humans are autopoietic systems which means that we are self-producing. From the moment of conception through our development into foetus’s, through our birth and experience as babies and children, on into adulthood and ending only in our death (and perhaps not even then) we are in the process of becoming who we are in relations with other people through our own responses to our environment and other people. For example, in infancy the ideas about babies held by those around us structured the conditions of our early life, but “even in infancy, even as a newborn, your responses to those others were just that – *your* responses, and as such they contributed to the precise nature of the inter-subjective relations in which you were engaged” (1999: 7). This is not a “positive feedback loop” between two forces but an autopoietic response. For Toren, the issue is not about bodies or embodiment, but about mind which is “*the* fundamental historical phenomenon” (1999: 3). Mind, she argues, “is a function of the whole person constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the environing world” (1999:12, 21) by which she means that we become who we are not just through our relationships with those around us (in which we allow each other subjectivity), but through the history of past relationships that make up the society and time in which we live and through our presence within a particular physical environment in which we experience such fundamentals as heat, cold, day, night, hunger etc.

As Toren says, we are always already informed by the history of our ancestor’s relations with one another, (or as Marx said more negatively “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx 1977: 300)). This historical approach applies ontogenetically and phylogenetically; as Toren writes:

In other words, the history of our ancestors’ relations with one another in the world has informed both who we are as particular persons and the conditions of our collective existence: our belonging to this group or that, the appearance of our bodies, the languages we speak, our susceptibility to particular illnesses and disease, our access to particular technologies, our relative riches or poverty, our ideas about ourselves and the world we live. Literally

everything about us, from our genes to our most secret and never-to-be-revealed private thoughts have been, and continue to be, informed by a past that at once unites and differentiates us. (Toren 1999:2)

Toren's anthropological approach insists on the crucial inclusion of children in any attempt to understanding embodied mind, "for it is by studying how, over time, they constitute their ideas of the world that we can come to have some insight into the historical nature of our own epistemological and ontological certainties" (1999: 3). Because "adults cannot have access to how they came to know what they know" (1999: 18) it is only through detailed study of how children constitute their understanding of the world that they share with adults, that the meaning that adults give to their actions can be understood. Contemporary children are constituting their ideas about the world through their relationships with their parents, other adults, and other children. They listen and watch what is going on at the same time as they are being given explicit instructions about what is happening or what they should be doing. Systematic study of children's' understanding can illuminate adult meaning, she argues, because meaning is not handed down and swallowed whole by children but is interpreted by them and in the process changed over time. What a child tells us about something such as a ritual, can reveal what they have picked up from watching adults and how they have interpreted this in the light of what they have been told by others. In this way, Toren aims to understand how it is that humans are "remarkably similar to one another in the ways we are different, and wonderfully different in the ways we are the same" (1999: 21).

Taking our lived experience as a starting point, then, leads to an understanding of cultural meaning that is dynamic and specific. This approach also leads towards a more involved methodology. As explained in the last chapter, Ots (1994) proposes that anthropologists should "experience participation" as well as carry out participant observation, in order that personal experience will enrich the field work. It was only by experiencing the emotional release of *qiqong* that he was able to understand his informants experience. Csordas (1999) cites the historian Berman who wrote that "History gets written with the mind holding the pen. What would it look like, what would it read like, if it got written with the body holding the pen?" Csordas adds that

Berman advocates a “visceral history” that not only takes into account that history is made and experienced with the body, but requires the experiential engagement of the historian in the matter of history. (1999:149)

I suggest the same engagement in considering excretion as an aspect of embodiment – both I, writing this, and you, reading it, will have an embodied knowledge of the subject and will inevitably draw on that in our reading and understanding. I have included my own subjective experience within my historical context of a particular form of embodiment in social relations with others, as well as the reported experiences of others and how this experience is disclosed (or not) through representations in literature, art, media, jokes, conversations, etc. This personal inclusion is not intended as a contribution to reflexive anthropology, but as an inevitable consequence of being embodied.

### From Body Products ...

Excretion is a function of the living body and in the process certain products are produced which are then eliminated from the body. In all societies these products are not merely shed, but are systematically removed from the living space. The day to day management of excreta has, as discussed in the previous chapter, received very little attention from anthropologists perhaps because of anthropologists own embodied discomfort with exploring this private and ambiguous activity which has rendered it trivial, disgusting, taken for granted, or all three. Anthropology has not shied away from the study of other substances exuded from the body, as the extensive literature on menstruation shows (see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988), however the reason for this interest is because anthropologists discovered that menstruation was not ignored or taken for granted in certain societies but played an explicitly central role in social relationships and so forced itself on their attention, leading them in time to reflect back on menstruation in the West (for example, Skultans 1988 and E. Martin 1989). Defecation, on the other hand, was ignored in ethnography just as it is ignored in daily life.

In 1977 Loudon published a paper “On Body Products” which was a call for further research into the subject. Until van der Geest’s article in 1998, however, (and his symposium and subsequent 1999 edition of the Dutch medical anthropological

journal *Medische Antropologie* dedicated to “Poep, cultuur en welbevinden”), little further had been done on defecation in anthropology, apart from Ndonko’s work (1993) on excrement in Cameroon (unfortunately not yet translated from the French and therefore not included in this thesis)<sup>11</sup>.

Loudon drew on his own experience of working in Africa, and some brief anthropological references, to make several interesting points about body products. He notes that body smells and body substances play an important part in establishing and expressing significant social relationships. The Tallensi, for example, regard “mystical dirt” (which includes body exudations) as harmless between husband and wife, but dangerous in other relationships (Fortes 1975 cited Loudon 1977: 162). Loudon does not elaborate this point, but clearly, as I discuss in the next chapter, intimacy in social relationships in the West is in part defined by who does or does not see our excreta or our acts of excretion. Loudon suggests that one of the reasons why excreta and acts of excretion assume a social importance is because of the proximity of the site of the organs of excretion to the organs of reproduction, “the frontiers *par excellence* of the self ...[and so] raised basic questions about identity” (1977: 164). Questions of identity are also raised by the smells of excreta which, for biochemical and social reasons, are “peculiarly liable to endowment with special meanings” (1977: 164). Loudon defines smell neurologically as a “lower” sense than sight, but as an important, if not more important, signifier of identity (in that the “other” smells worse than we do). Loudon states that in all societies “as far as one can tell” defecation is “subject to public and private arrangements, to expectations involving time and space, regularity and appropriateness” (1977: 168). These arrangements both derive from and constrain human need. The smell of excreta is a consideration in determining the particular arrangements, although Loudon says that the importance of this may be relative, citing the Tallensi again who, according to Fortes, defecate just outside their homesteads creating a stench in the rainy season “enough to shake the hardest anthropologist” (Fortes 1945: 8). Turning to his own field work in Africa, he recalls the frequency with which he was consulted (as a

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<sup>11</sup> An exception to this has come from the anthropology of nursing literature in which issues of incontinence have been discussed against a relatively uncritical account of “continence” (Lawler 1991, Seymour 1998, Lawton 2000). Seymour and Lawton are discussed in chapter six.

doctor) by men, and by women on behalf of their children, for various bowel complaints and requests for purges, “not simply for the relief of a wide variety of complaints but as preventatives and because of the generally good effect on health” (1977: 173), including an aphrodisiac benefit. He also notes the regular use of enemas by his informants. Finally he considers the use of symbolic excreta in mortuary rites described by Wilson (1957) as demonstrating a link between filth, corpses and excrement. A sign of madness among the Nyakyusa is eating excrement, and this act is mimed during the mortuary rituals as a prophylactic against madness.

Loudon’s article is an important introductory to a consideration of body products in general and defecation in particular in the definition of social relationships and identity, their use in ritual and their role in maintaining health and defining living space. However, by his own admission, he does not have enough material to do more than offer some interesting comparisons and reflections, and to raise some questions to be followed up by future research.

Van der Geest’s short article published twenty years later offers a much more detailed discussion of excrement drawn from his fieldwork among the Akan in Ghana, which suggests the value of considering one’s own experience as an insight into cultural practice. On his second day of fieldwork he was taken to the public latrine:

When it was my turn I entered the place. A penetrating stench hit me in the face. The floor was littered with used paper. Squatting people stared at me. I felt terribly uncomfortable, walked past them and left the place. I told my host that I did not have the urge, which was very true. (1998: 8)

Van der Geest’s honest account of his experience both says something about the Western experience of defecation and the Akan’s. As he elucidates in his article, the Akan detest excrement and are extremely concerned about removing dirt from their bodies, but paradoxically so inefficient about getting rid of it that they are daily confronted with faeces because of their sanitary arrangements. Defecating daily is of paramount importance, preferably in the morning, and constipation considered a major cause of disease. Van der Geest refers to constipation as a “culture bound syndrome”, a cause of myriad symptoms and high use of laxatives and enemas. Before the morning movement, Akan consider themselves dirty and will avoid

greeting one another, ignoring each other on the way to the latrine as an “effective proxemic device to reduce the unpleasant presence of others” (1998: 10). Van der Geest is puzzled, therefore, that the Akan have not developed more efficient ways of eliminating it from their daily life, and suggests it is a question of ignoring it: “a mental solution for a very physical problem” (1998: 12), although his informant to whom he suggested this was unconvinced, offering poverty and geological difficulties instead.

However, for my purposes, what is most interesting in van der Geest’s article is what it says about his own cultural perspective on excrement and defecation. Clearly, not being able to excrete alone and in a clean place took away his urge entirely, these aspects apparently far more important than eliminating dirt from the inside, also suggested by his comment that he has never considered constipation a problem or taken laxatives. In discussing the language of excretion, he suggests that the English word “shit” is far less offensive or abusive than its equivalent in the Akan language. He also adds that there is only one, non-shameful Akan use of the equivalent for “shit”, used in an expression translated as “If you eat alone, you shit alone”, the meaning being that a problem is the consequence of one’s own stupidity and, he says, refers to a time in the past when villages were smaller and getting rid of faeces was less of a problem. What this implies, however, is that excreting out of sight of others – such a fundamental aspect of modern Western experience – is neither necessary nor particularly desired by the Akan<sup>12</sup>.

Van der Geest’s article is a fascinating insight into the importance of this mundane and taken for granted activity, and picks up on some of the issues raised by Loudon such as the role of defecation in defining intimate relationships (van der Geest felt that by secretly making arrangements to use the toilets in the Catholic mission he was risking damaging his relationship with his research assistant) and differing cultural ideas of what is important when it comes to managing bodily emissions. However, his problematising of what he sees as a peculiar paradox says as much

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<sup>12</sup> Although an abstract of a later article by van der Geest suggests that older Akan may prefer to defecate out of sight of others. Unfortunately I have not been able to read the article which is written in Dutch (van der Geest 1999).



about his own views on excretion as the Akan's. For example, it seems that the unpleasantness of the public latrine and the private bucket latrine in his host's house are his own perception and he does not report similar comments from his informants. No one seems to have complained to him of the problem of defecating in close proximity to other people or their excrement. Just as Caplan (1988) later realised that the paradox she found between Swahili women's sexual autonomy and the Islamic value of virginity and sexual segregation only existed as a paradox for her and not for her informants (Caplan 1988: 10), it may be that there is no paradox to the Akan because they are able to get rid of the excrement daily from their bodies which is all that concerns them.

Neither Loudon nor van der Geest present their findings within a broader theoretical framework, offering their insights as suggestions for valuable future anthropological enquiry. However, the appearance of faeces in social life as products with symbolic value has fascinated some other Western theorists; four in particular have contributed to the theory of the place of excrement and defecation in Western life. The ideas of Freud, Elias, Bakhtin and Douglas have transgressed their respective disciplinary boundaries of psychology, history, literary theory and anthropology to influence twentieth century thinking about bodily functions more than any other. While the theories of the four writers are very different in their overall purpose, methods and perspective, what they have in common is a desire for a greater understanding of Western ideas about excretion and a recognition of the ambiguous nature of shit.

This general outlook – that a serious consideration of excrement and defecation can tell us something about ourselves – was behind Captain J. Bourke's publication in 1891 of a fascinating and chaotic collection called *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*. This work provides a useful contrast with and background to the work of Freud, Elias, Bakhtin and Douglas because it epitomises the Victorian evolutionary sense of achievement and superiority; the purpose of *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* is stated in the preface to be precisely to show the (Western middle-class male) reader how civilised he is. This evolutionary approach proposes that human development progresses in a linear fashion from primitive savage to modern Western man, and the study of scatological rites can illustrate this development because the further along the path of civilisation, the further removed people are from the taint of filth:

The subject of scatologic or stercoraceous rites and practices, however repellent it may be under some of its aspects, is none the less deserving of the profoundest consideration, – if for no other reason than that from the former universal dissemination of such aberrations of the intellect, as well as of the religious impulses of the human race, and their present curtailment or restriction, the progress of humanity upward and onward may best be measured. (1891: iii)

The book came about following a disturbing scene witnessed by Captain Bourke of the USA Third Cavalry in 1881. Staying with an ethnologist friend in New Mexico he saw a ritual performed in his honour by a secret medicine order of Zuñis which involved urine drinking and suggestions of faeces eating. The performance shocked and disgusted him deeply but fascinated him enough to spend the next ten years compiling his collection, published with the sub-title “A Dissertation upon the Employment of Excrementitious Remedial Agents in Religion, Therapeutics, Divination, Witchcraft, Love-Philters, etc., in all Parts of the Globe”, and the warning on the title page that the work was “not for general perusal”. With painstaking research, Bourke found evidence of the use of excremental material (or substances that are intended to imitate or represent it) all over the world and took an evolutionary approach to such performances and vestigial acts. It is through the progress of civilisation, he argued, and in particular Christianity and Judaism<sup>13</sup> that the use of excrement was gradually replaced with symbolic representations before being eradicated altogether.

The book is a ramshackle collection of references “from over one thousand authorities” to the use of excrement, grouped together under 54 chapters with titles such as “Human excrement used in food by the insane and others”, “The employment of excrement in food by savage tribes”, “The mushroom in connection with the fairies” and “Tolls of flatulence exacted of prostitutes in France”. However, the crux of his argument is clear from the first two chapters where he moves straight

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<sup>13</sup> “Hebrews and Christians will discover a common ground of congratulation in the fact that believers in their systems are now absolutely free from any suggestion of this filth taint, every example to the contrary being in direct opposition to the spirit and practice of those two great bodies to which the world’s civilization is so deeply indebted.” (Bourke 1891: 3)

from his discussion of the Zuñi urine dance to a discussion of the old European Feast of Fools which included the eating of turd-shaped sausages (called *boudin*) and the besmirching of passers-by with dung from a dung-cart. Bourke notes that “it must be admitted that there is certainly a wonderful concatenation of resemblances between these filthy and inexplicable rites on different sides of a great ocean.” (1891: 12). The point of Bourke equating the Feast of Fools with the dance of Zuñis is that he makes the assumption that the former “might have been well sublimed from the eating of pure excrement, as among the Zuñis, to the consumption of the *boudin*, the excrement symbol” (1891: 12). He does not argue that there is a direct link between the two rituals, but that both are left over from an earlier, universal period through which human history progresses. Although he offers a historical explanation for the urine dance of the Zuñis (that it may have its roots in an earlier period of famine during a long siege against neighbouring tribes, interpreting as a precedent 2 Kings xviii, 27 and Isaiah xxxvi, 12<sup>14</sup>), he does not offer a suggestion for the origin of the Feast of Fools. However, in his conclusion, anticipating Freud, he suggests that interest in excrement is instinctual and his work demonstrates “to what extent primitive man, in corresponding environment in different regions of the world, will display the same instincts and act under identical impulses” (1891: 467). This is the point of his study – that interest in things excremental is a characteristic instinct of “primitives”.

Bourke’s idea that the ritual use of faeces represents the uncontrolled expression of primitive instincts is suggestive of Freud, who was a contemporary of Bourke and who knew of Bourke’s work (Greenblatt 1982: 15n). Freud wrote the introduction to the 1913 German edition of *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, in which he praised Bourke for “dealing with these proscribed aspects of human life” and pointed to the parallels between Bourke’s work and his own attempts to confront excremental matters in an objective and scientific manner (Chu 1993: 46n). However, from the evident disgust Bourke shows for scatological activity, and the relief he feels that his society has freed itself completely from this “filth taint”, one can only assume that

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<sup>14</sup> “But Rabshakeh said, Hath my master sent me to thy master and to thee to speak these words? Hath he not sent me to the men that sit up on the wall, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss with you?”

Freud's theories would have disturbed him. For Freud, interest in faeces and defecation is a normal part of a child's development which in the ontological progress of its life will be either repressed or sublimated into an interest in something more socially acceptable, such as money or art, or may pathologically reappear in obsession. Nevertheless, the implication in Freud is that no society is free from what Bourke called the "filth taint" as it is an essential aspect of our psychic development, and was part of the reason why Freud saw his work as the third revolutionary blow to mankind, after Copernicus and Darwin.

Much of what Freud has to say about defecation is found in his writings on sexuality (Freud 1977<sup>15</sup>). For the very young child, Freud argues, the experiences of eating and defecating satisfy its immediate desires and so oral and anal experiences and the organs of eating and excreting have a great physical and emotional significance in the early stages of development, and also a great symbolic significance. Freud's radical notion was that children are born with sexual instincts. At first their sexual impulses derive from pleasure already experienced in connection with one of the vital somatic functions, i.e. nourishment and defecation. An organ, part of the skin or the mucous membrane which once provided pleasure (e.g. lips, anus) is used to recreate that pleasure, and becomes what Freud calls an erotogenic zone. The child's sexual aim is to obtain satisfaction by stimulation of the erotogenic zone, and children can increase the stimulation of the mucous membrane of the anus by withholding defecation, thus increasing the pleasure:

its accumulation brings about violent muscular contractions and, as it passes through the anus, is able to produce powerful stimulation of the mucous membrane. In so doing it must no doubt cause not only painful but also highly pleasurable sensations....The contents of the bowels... act as a stimulating mass upon a sexually sensitive portion of mucous membrane (1977: 103)

The child, says Freud, is "anxious not to miss the subsidiary pleasure attached to defecating" in this way (1977: 103). Freud goes on to argue that the child first

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<sup>15</sup> In particular, the following writings: "Three essays on the theory of sexuality" (1905), "Character and anal eroticism" (1908) and "On transformations of instinct as exemplified in anal eroticism" (1917).

withholds faeces for its own auto-erotic satisfaction, and later as an assertion of its independence (1977: 299).

The experience of defecating is significantly different from feeding in that it is about letting go, expulsion rather than incorporation. Freud's follower, Erikson (1995) says that this adds "the dimension of voluntary release, of dropping and throwing away to that of grasping appropriation" to the child's repertoire of experience (1995: 81). Elimination is not just the model of throwing away, however. As the child develops and gains greater control over its sphincter, it is also able to hold on to its faeces. Excretion is also therefore a model for retention. The child gains greater control over all its muscle system and becomes able to hold on to and throw away other things in its environment. Erikson labels all the "seemingly contradictory tendencies" of hoarding and discarding, clinging to and throwing away, as "retentive-eliminative modes", based in the experience of holding on to and eliminating faeces.

As well as, and as a result of, providing intense physical experiences, the products of defecation also take on a symbolic significance. Over the three essays on anal eroticism (Freud 1977) Freud mentions various meanings which the content of the bowel comes to have for the child. The most detailed discussion of this is in the *Transformations of Instinct* essay in which he states that "the concepts *faeces* (money, gift), *baby* and *penis* are ill-distinguished from one another and are easily interchangeable" (1977: 296), in that these elements replace one another freely in the unconscious. Some of his argument relies on linguistic links, such as the expression "little one" (das Kleine) used for both penis and baby, and the word "lumpf" which Little Hans used for faeces and baby (1977: 299). But these linguistic links, he argues, stem from the already existing unconscious links which arise through the development of the child.

Freud outlines a group of characteristics which he had noted in many of his patients who also appeared to have had a strong tendency towards erotogenicity of the anal zone in childhood. These characteristics are orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy, and he concludes that they are the results of the sublimation of anal eroticism (1977: 211). Orderliness is a reaction formation against an interest in something unclean and which should not be part of the body (1977: 212-213). Obstinacy is related to the

child withholding defecation to express its will, and the common practice in his time of smacking children on the buttocks. Freud also relates it to the use of anal imagery to express defiance such as the German expression “Lick my arse” or the showing of the buttocks. There are extensive connections between faeces and money, revealed in many common expressions, fairy tales and myths. Gold is, as it were, the opposite of shit (the most precious substance known to man and the most worthless), and an interest in money is a sublimation of an interest in dirt. Orderliness, obstinacy and parsimony therefore define the ‘anal character’.

In his 1917 essay on *Transformations of instinct* he takes this argument further, stating that any of the characteristics described stem from anal-erotic sources and the ‘anal character’ cases he had defined were “merely extreme instances” (1977: 295). He concludes in this essay that the genital phase must be preceded by a pre-genital organisation “in which sadism and anal eroticism play the leading parts” (1977: 295). From anal eroticism being a particular form of organisation experienced by some people for whom the anus became the erotogenic zone, Freud concluded that all persons have a history of anal eroticism.

Freud considers normal development to involve either a sublimation of anality by an interest in creative pursuits such as painting or architecture, or a repression expressed as a tendency to hoard (especially money) and to obsess about cleanliness. There is no room in his argument for a consideration of adult experience of excreting other than as always a reminder of childhood experience within family relationships (as Douglas (1984) points out, psychoanalysis restricts experience to relationships within the family, while her argument, discussed below, sees bodily experience as expressing all social relationships, e.g. caste relationships).

I have presented a distorted view of Freud by only discussing his writing on anality, which makes up a small part of his theory. However, the basic idea that the infant gains pleasure from shitting (both holding on to it and letting it go) and then transfers this pleasure onto other symbolic substitutes such as money, painting, babies etc has been hugely influential. One of the criticisms made of Freud is that because his theories were based on work amongst a small group of his contemporaries it is not possible to suggest that they have the universal significance that he claims (and in

anthropology some of his theories have been applied to different cultures, either to prove or disprove them, see for example Parsons 1967, Spiro 1987, Heald and Deluz 1994). Indeed, many of the characteristics attributed by Freud to the anal character have been suggested by Dundes (1984) as being culturally specific to German and Austrian culture rather than universal. Using evidence from folklore, Dundes argues that the “connection between the concern for cleanliness and toilet training is not just a psychoanalytic construct. Rather it is an association proclaimed openly in German folklore....The important theoretical point here is that so-called anal erotic character traits are specifically linked to toilet activities in German folklore (as opposed to psychoanalytic theory).” (1984: 91). While it is dangerous to apply characteristics to a whole culture in the way that Dundes does in his book, it is important to consider that Freud was writing at a particular time and place. However, for my purposes Freud’s ideas are important because the idea of anal eroticism and an anal character has become part of everyday language in Britain, with certain activities such as excessive tidying or filing being referred to as “anal” by people who have never read Freud or any of his followers. I will return to his ideas in chapter four where I look at how we experience defecation as a pleasurable release, and in chapter six where I consider the issue of control.

In the work of Elias (1994) on the history of civilisation, written in the 1930s not long after Freud’s work on sexuality was published, Freud’s influence can be seen although he does not explicitly refer to him. In some ways, his work is a response to Freud, a call for a more historical and sociological view of how we have come to behave in the way we do. Elias takes a processual view of Western culture in which the formation of the state and the requirement for people to live together in new ways gradually changed social relations such that the body and its functions were moved out of public view and into the private sphere. Over time – illustrated by references in etiquette manuals – defecation as an act, and then as an idea became hidden, and this concealment means that

The greater or lesser discomfort we feel toward people who discuss or mention their bodily functions more openly, who conceal and restrain these functions less than we do, is one of the dominant feelings expressed in the judgment “barbaric” or “uncivilized”. Such, then, is the nature of “barbarism and its discontents” or, in more precise and less evaluative terms, the

discontent with the different structure of affects, the different standard of repugnance which is still to be found today in many societies which we term “uncivilized,” the standard of repugnance which preceded our own and is its precondition. (1994: 47)

This then situates Bourke’s disgust as being a specifically historical attitude, as “an affirmation of his own cultural identity, a mark of his participation in that civilized world that takes the primitive as one of its characteristic intellectual and moral concerns, the very emblem of that which is alien” (Greenblatt 1982: 4).

Elias traces, through specific examples from several hundred years of etiquette books, changing attitudes to various bodily functions and behaviours including defecation. As with the examples he gives on the use of the knife, table manners, spitting, sleeping and blowing the nose, the thrust of these changes appears to be a distancing between men and animals, and between the socially superior and those lower down the social scale, through the mechanism of shame. With the “advance in the frontiers of shame and the threshold of repugnance” people began to hide their bodily functions from each other and to feel shame if exposed. Through a historical process, the psyche also came to change, suggesting the particular neuroses studied by Freud are historically constituted rather than innate. It is the suppression of instincts that were once allowed free expression that creates neuroses:

In general, impulses of this kind have disappeared from the waking consciousness of adults under the pressure of conditioning. Only psychoanalysis uncovers them in the form of unsatisfied and unsatisfiable desires which can be described as the unconscious or the dream level of the mind. And these desires have indeed in our society the character of an “infantile” residue, because the social standard of adults makes a complete suppression and transformation of such tendencies necessary, so that they appear, when occurring in adults, as a “remnant” from childhood. (1994: 116)

...At any rate, an instinctual tendency which today appears at most in the unconscious, in dreams, in the sphere of secrecy, or more consciously only behind the scenes, the interest in bodily secretions, here shows itself at an earlier stage of the historical process more clearly and openly, and so in a form in which today it is only “normally” visible in children. (1994: 122)



He suggests that there may have always been neuroses, but contemporary neuroses are of a specific historical form “which needs psychogenetic and sociogenetic elucidation” (1994: 123). His work then offers a sociological element to Freud’s ideas, emphasising the importance of phylogeny on the ontological development of the child. In fact for Elias the process of “training” in childhood is nothing other than an individual, speeded up process of civilising that echoes the process of centuries. “The psychogenesis of the adult makeup in civilized society cannot, therefore, be understood if considered independently of the sociogenesis of our “civilization”. ...the individual, in his short history, passes once more through some of the processes that his society has traversed in its long history.” (1994: xiii). The relationship between a child and his or her parents is therefore only part of the process by which a child develops its particular habits and attitudes towards its body and its functions; “it is always society as a whole, the entire figuration of human beings, that exerts its pressure on the new generation, bending them more or less perfectly to its purpose” (1994: 115). This, then, offers an opposing view to Freud who argued that it is innate psychological processes that produce the feelings of shame. The specific examples that Elias gives will be discussed more in the next chapter on the idea of privacy and intimacy.

Although writing at the same time as Elias, Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais was not available in Britain until the 1960s (Bakhtin 1984). He offers a useful counterpoint to Elias, following as he does the Russian tradition of emphasising low culture over high and finding in folk culture of carnival, laughter and the material body a powerful critique of the civilised and restrained body. His premise echoes Elias’ idea of progressing change since the Middle Ages through which people became more distanced from the natural and biological cycle of birth, reproduction and death. The earlier form of the body is referred to by Bakhtin as the grotesque and he contrasts this with the classical form which gradually superseded the grotesque in terms of social value and imagery. Bakhtin sums up what he means by the grotesque as follows:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world

enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body ...[it] is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects.” (1984: 26-27)

He contrasts this with the body that began to emerge as an ideal during the Renaissance, the classical body which is closed, complete, “fenced off from all other bodies”, all traces of growth and proliferation closed off and smoothed over, depicted most often in young adulthood, as far removed from birth as from death. Bakhtin makes it clear that the classical image of the body could not completely destroy the grotesque as the reality of our bodies that defecate, copulate and procreate keep the grotesque ever to hand. However, he also argues that over the past few hundred years the concept of the grotesque has increasingly become removed from its roots in carnival and folk humour, and has become merely negative and destructive having lost its regenerative power that was so central to the cyclical idea of nature.

Bakhtin’s work is important in the way defecation has been considered because it is one of the few that considers shit in a positive and humorous light. As a feature of the grotesque body, excrement “represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic; it is the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted.” (1984: 152).

We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter. ...Dung and urine lend a bodily character to matter, to the world, to the cosmic elements, which become closer, more intimate, more easily grasped, for this is the matter, the elemental force, born from the body itself. It transforms cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster.” (1984: 335).

It is this regenerative power that Bakhtin argues has been lost since the Renaissance, reduced to “cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (1984: 38) although – as I will argue in chapter five – it seems that in the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century the grotesque as a

creative force is evident through our continued ambivalence towards our excrement and excretory practices.

According to Russo (1995), Bakhtin was critical of Freud for ignoring the social in the formation of identity, citing Clark and Holquist (1984) who placed Bakhtin as Freud's polar opposite. However, as Paster (1993) points out, Bakhtin is not actually talking about real flesh and blood people in his work, but images from literature and carnival, and Bakhtin repeatedly stressed that the grotesque body "never presents an individual body" (1984: 318). He is using it to make a political point about class struggle and liberation, identifying the grotesque with plebeian culture and an anti-hierarchical movement which threatens established order. For this reason, the grotesque body is a type which cannot belong to any real body or, as Paster says, be identified with self hood or historical persons (1993: 15). Paster argues that a person living at the time of Rabelais would have experienced their body through the concept of the humours (see chapter 4) and what she describes as the humoral body is very similar to Bakhtin's grotesque in terms of the emphasis on flow between the inside and the outside, but is situated historically and culturally. Bakhtin's work is most useful in considering representations of bodies rather than embodied experience. However, as will be discussed in chapter 5, his insights into the grotesque body are helpful in considering the experience of engaging with the representations of bodies in literature and film, particularly in relation to laughter.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed Douglas' general theory about the body and how it stands for society. These ideas had built on her earlier book, *Purity and Danger* (1984), in which she developed her ideas specifically around pollution, focusing on the products of the body and, like Bakhtin, the boundaries of the body. For Douglas the body is a bounded system that symbolises society so that "the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human body" (1984: 115). The boundaries of the body represent the boundaries of society so, when threatened, a society will impose restrictions on the boundaries of the bodies of its members, especially the women who literally reproduce society through childbirth. Almost epitomising Bakhtin's idea of the individual, classical body which denies and hides its apertures and protuberances, Douglas argues that because boundaries define

identity, orifices and substances that transgress the boundaries cause particular anxiety.

[A]ll margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. (1984:121)

Douglas is explicitly talking about what bodily products, as they appear in ritual classification, tell us about a society. She is not talking about any individual's experience of excreting. She uses the example of the Coorgs of India who have strict rules about pollution in which the revulsion surrounding touching excrement expresses the order of caste and the threat to identity of the group as a whole (1984: 124). However, as individuals they are not anxious about defecating:

If this pollution rule expressed individual anxieties we would expect Hindoos to be controlled and secretive about the act of defecation. It comes as a considerable shock to read that slack disregard is their normal attitude, to such an extent that pavements, verandahs and public places are littered with faeces until the sweeper comes along. (1984: 124).

Within the caste system provision is made for the removal of excrement that fits in with both the body and social symbolic structure: the road sweepers are as polluting and untouchable to the higher castes as the excrement they remove. Douglas is not interested in bodily products as material substances, or in the process of their production, but as symbolic objects, they are *about* something else, that is, social relationships between people.

What Douglas does in *Purity and Danger* is to turn to society for an explanation rather than turning to psychology. Since Freud, psychoanalysis has had rather a monopoly on theorising defecation (apart from Elias and Bakhtin – although the latter's work was not known in England at the time of *Purity and Danger*), and this led to some writers equating any interest or concern about excrement in any society with an anal fixation rooted in unresolved infantile fantasies. Writers such as Norman

O. Brown used psychoanalytical arguments to explain the use of excrement in ritual or myth as an escape from reality (that is, an escape from the reality of the lack of effective control over its environment which is how Brown characterises the difference between “primitive or archaic” and “modern” culture). Brown (1985) considered that “archaic man” does not adequately sublimate anal eroticism, but retains “the magic body of infancy”, and rather than locating power in money (as one way of overcoming anal eroticism), he continues to locate power in dirt and excrement. Echoing Bourke’s ideas, Brown writes that

Archaic man characteristically has a massive structure of excremental magic, which indicates the degree to which his anality remains unsublimated, and at the same time indicates the bodily fantasies from which the disembodied fantasies of sublimation are derived. (1985: 299).

Douglas explicitly repudiates this notion which she says is an unsubstantiated assumption based on “the strong similarity between certain ritual forms and the behaviour of psychopathic individuals” and a mistaken assumption that rituals are intended to solve personal psychological problems (1984: 115-117). She argues from the evidence of anthropology that far from using excrement in rituals as an escape from reality “cultures which frankly develop bodily symbolism may be seen to use it to confront experience with its inevitable pains and losses” (1984: 120). While she argues that the body is universally a source of symbols, cultural variation cannot be explained by reference to psychoanalysis but must turn to the social structure.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, and as she herself says (1984: 124, see above) Douglas’ ideas are, like those of Bakhtin’s, less useful for understanding how defecation is experienced but very useful for how excretion is represented to us in images and how we respond to those representations.

### ...to Embodied Processes

The preceding discussion of various ideas about defecation has presented this fundamental act and its products mainly as objectified phenomena rather than as processes experienced by embodied persons. Freud, in fact, is the only theorist who starts with pre-objective experience, although his interest is more in how this becomes represented in the unconscious through sublimation and repression than in

how embodied experience is lived day-to-day. Loudon and van der Geest consider the act as well as the product, and, for me, the most interesting parts of their articles are where they draw on experiential data such as Loudon's male informants desire for purges and van der Geest's own discomforts.

What is needed is an approach which focuses on the process of defecation as embodied or lived and which considers how people experience this process and make meaning out of it. Using the ideas of Csordas, Toren and Mellor and Shilling I have approached defecation as a social process that is constituted and reconstituted daily in its performance and within the context of ideas about what it means. The idea of performance is particularly useful here, as it captures the action as embodying cultural as well as personal meaning, as being both expressive and instrumental, and as being an action that we perform in a particular culturally appropriate way. In contemporary Britain we sit, for example, rather than squat; we know when we can and cannot draw attention to our performance. It is a technique that we perfect over time, with explicit instruction from our parents, and the mastery of which is one of the signs we use to judge identity (such as, human rather than animal, adult rather than child, or sane rather than mad).

This idea of defecation as a cultural performance is taken from Frankenberg (1986) who developed the idea of sickness as the cultural performance of "illth".

Frankenberg built on Victor Turner's work on social dramas. Turner (1970, 1975, 1982, 1995) – in turn – used van Gennep's theory of ritual (that ritual passes through three phases of separation, transition and reintegration) to analyse social change and processes over time, finding that in the crises of everyday life that cause breaches in normal relations, every day structural relationships are broken down into periods of anti-structure wherein people relate to each other in the spirit of *communitas* (as Frankenberg (1986: 621) puts it, "as incumbents of bodies rather than as incumbents of social positions"). In the process of ritual, there is a separation from the normal situation, a creation of "a cultural realm which is defined as "out of time" i.e. beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines." (V. Turner 1982: 24). In the liminal period of transition, traditional structures and relations are broken down into their component parts and recombined freely and playfully, in a way reminiscent of Bakhtin's idea of destruction and regeneration in the grotesque:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. ...It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. (V. Turner 1995: 95)

In fact, Turner's theory of liminality offers a re-reading of Bakhtin's ideas of carnival in which the grotesque image of the body is shown to be an essential part of a cyclical ritual of change – with all the liminal characteristics of inversion, hybridisation, playfulness and ambiguity – and the shift Bakhtin notes from the grotesque to the classical could be shown using Turner's theory to be the consequence of social changes which removed the obligation to participate in carnival. Turner made a distinction between those ritual processes which are obligatory and are part of the work of everyday life in which participants do not choose to participate (because they are already participating through their membership of that society), which are a particular feature of the Ndembu society he studied, and probably a feature of carnival as described by Bakhtin, and those more secular processes which, in the separation between work and leisure, are removed from any ritual or obligatory context. When Turner developed his theory to incorporate liminal processes in post-industrial societies, he coined the word *liminoid* to describe those periods and phenomena that emerge in the betwixt and between time. He finds the liminoid emerging in the modern arts and sciences of post-industrial society:

because they are outside the arenas of direct industrial production, because they constitute the “liminoid” analogues of liminal processes and phenomena in tribal and early agrarian societies, their very outsiderhood disengages them from direct functional action on the minds and behavior of a society's members. To be either their agents or their audience is an *optional* activity.” (Turner 1975:16)

Frankenberg developed Turner's ideas through their application to episodes of sickness which appear as social dramas, breaches in normal social relations. In studying episodes of sickness in Italy, Frankenberg found that cyclically recurring acute sickness was experienced in this way by children, who, by being ill, were in a liminal position and as such were free from school, free to enjoy particular television programmes and special food, and in fact were obliged to do so; “the sanction for

failure to comply is rediagnosis as being seriously sick” (Frankenberg 1986: 623-4). Frankenberg was thus able to offer a way of approaching sickness that does not take as given the problems identified by medicine, but instead approaches it as a social and lived experience of which medicine or nursing is but one part.

Frankenberg also drew on Goffman’s idea of performance as the presentation of self. Goffman (1971) considered social interaction as a performance through which we present information about ourselves to others through our embodied actions. Like Douglas’ idea of concordance, Goffman argued that we use a variety of techniques to convey the desired message about ourselves and the people we are with. Developing the dramatic metaphor of performance, Goffman identified different geographical spaces in which we perform/live in our particularly indoor Anglo-American society (Goffman 1971: 109). “Front region” is the place where the performance is given, and “backstage” is a place, relative to the performance, “where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (1971: 114). This is a useful reworking of the idea of public and private space, because through his many fascinating examples Goffman shows how these spaces can continually shift in meaning as well as place; private space can become instantly public and vice versa, sometimes problematically, sometimes not. In defining toilets as a backstage area he can suggest several reasons why defecation is carried out in private in our society.

In our society, defecation involves an individual in activity which is defined as inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards expressed in many of our performances. Such activity also causes the individual to disarrange his clothing and to ‘go out of play’, that is, to drop from his face the expressive mask that he employs in face-to-face interaction. At the same time it becomes difficult for him to reassemble his personal front should the need to enter into interaction suddenly occur. Perhaps that is a reason why toilet doors in our society have locks on them. (Goffman 1971: 123)

Seeing the toilet as “backstage” rather than private shows it as integral to daily life rather than merely opposed to the public.

Goffman’s idea of performance keeps central the fact of our embodiment, our presence in the world. However, his approach is similar to Douglas’ in the way he



regards the body as a medium of expression, rather than as our medium of having a world in the first place. Frankenberg's idea of sickness as cultural performance, on the other hand, is thoroughly embodied and embedded in daily life. It was through observing and listening to the Italian children and their families during periods of sickness, as well as through attention to newspaper and television reports, festivals, political leaflets etc., that he came to understand how sickness is constituted as a meaningful experience, not just for the sick but for those around them.

Sickness as cultural performance provides a way to understand the intricate relationship between expressive/instrumental and instrumental/expressive. It provides a discourse in which comparisons can be made between cultures and periods, and above all it lends itself to a *sociology* of sickness that is not reduced to the individual, the biological, or the merely textual and yet allows for the recording of personal enterprise and idiosyncrasy. (Frankenberg 1986: 625)

In a similar way, considering defecation as cultural performance (rather than, say, as biological function, or as the medical problem of incontinence, or as symbolic act) allows for the kind of cultural phenomenology that Csordas called for. To reiterate Toren, "literally everything about us, from our genes to our most secret and never-to-be-revealed private thoughts have been, and continue to be, informed by a past that at once unites and differentiates us" (1999:2) and so studying one aspect of life, such as defecation (or sickness, or ritual) can reveal information about other aspects. Indeed, Boehrer goes so far as to write that "studying a given culture's alimentary habits is tantamount to studying its view of the world." (1997: 21). Studying excretion as cultural performance or embodied process allows for generalisations about how we perform / experience this act without denying differences between peoples' behaviours / experiences; as Toren said, we are remarkably similar in the ways we are different from each other, and remarkably different in the ways we are the same, precisely because we all embody our own history and the history of those before and alongside us.

# Chapter 3 – Out of Sight, Out of Mind

## Introduction

The first thing to notice about defecation in Britain today is that it is not very noticeable at all. As a rule, defecation is hidden from view. Westerners are often shocked when travelling in India to see people defecating in full view of others because it appears as a violation of a fundamental principle which has been learned ever since they had control over their bowels, that they must protect both themselves from being seen and others from seeing them (that is, a recognition that people don't want to see someone shitting any more than anyone wants to be seen) and that evidence of excretion must be hidden as much as possible, not just the sight of it but also the sounds, the smells and the very idea of it.

However, at the same time there are acceptable occasions in which a Western person might see another person excrete or see their excreta. In infancy, sickness, or within close family relationships, one person may shit in the presence of another. These situations are all within relationships of intimacy. Thus, while on the one hand excretion as a private act excludes anyone from seeing it, on the other hand as an intimate act it allows certain people in, can even constitute the relationship as intimate, and – as I showed in the introduction – the creation of intimacy also allows people to talk about excretion.

It is particularly when confronted with cultures where excretion is not so hidden that it becomes clear how important is privacy to Western people<sup>16</sup>. Van der Geest's article (1998) on defecation in the Ghanaian town he lived in shows how, despite the Akan abhorrence of excrement, the act of excretion is neither private nor intimate

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<sup>16</sup> Lawton (2000) notes that in the hospice where she carried out fieldwork working class patients preferred to stay in the communal ward while middle class patients preferred private rooms. This suggests different class attitudes towards privacy which I do not discuss here but would be worth further research. Nevertheless, the notion of a division between private and public, and an understanding that bodily functions are confined to the former, is characteristic of modern Western society.

from a Western point of view. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Akan have an expression “if you eat alone, you shit alone” which is used to imply that another person’s problem is the consequence of their own stupidity. It refers, says van der Geest, to a time when the Akan defecated in the area outside the village and people tended to go together for safety, but it implies that the performance of this act in the company of others was the preferred situation. Van der Geest was told that “formerly it was not a pleasure to go out in the night to visit the toilet way out in the bush. There could be wild animals or witches. It was better to have some company.” (1998: 11). Today, most Akan in the town use public latrines where the person is in view of others whether strangers or neighbours during the act of excretion; defecation as a solitary act does not seem to be normal, even though some people have their own bucket latrine.

Van der Geest, unable and unwilling to use the public latrines or the personal latrine of his host (which while satisfying his need for privacy, exposed him to the evidence of other peoples’ excreta), arranged to use the toilet at a nearby mission, but experienced a sense of disloyalty to his research assistant; he felt that his relationship with his assistant was compromised by *not* sharing the intimacy of talking about and using the toilet facilities. He writes

I never revealed my unfaithfulness to my research assistant. I felt too uneasy about it. It was indeed a serious breach of confidence which, I feared, would damage our relationship and the work. (1998: 8)

When working in India, while always being able to excrete in surroundings both clean and private, I found that the openness with which other people would talk about my occasional bouts of diarrhoea very disconcerting. At a church service I attended the pastor prayed for my “motions” in a church full of strangers and colleagues. What was discomfiting for me was that there was no relationship of intimacy to frame the occasion.

Privacy and intimacy are central to British experiences of excretion, and although linked are not completely synonymous. Private is the opposite of public, and the two words define each other in the Oxford English Dictionary as mutually exclusive categories. It has meanings of concealed, secret, individual, alone, confidential, and secluded, and refers to places, persons and position in society. The word privy

meaning latrine comes from the same route, from the Latin word meaning withdrawn from public life. The definitions of intimacy in the OED stress the senses of innermost and close relationship with implications of allowing penetration of one's self by another (sexual intercourse is another definition of intimacy), of inmost thoughts and feelings shared with another person, and this fits in with the idea of the creation of intimacy through shared acts of excretion. A doctor performing an anal examination on a patient, a mother changing her baby's nappy, a carer carrying out a manual evacuation of a sick relative, one family member using the toilet while another family member takes a bath in the same room; these acts are both constituting a bond of intimacy between participants and allowed to take place because the relationship is already intimate. Intimacy is created partly through the exclusion of other people and partly through the shared understanding that defecation and faeces are usually hidden.

In this chapter I want to explore the historical development of the Western idea of privacy and intimacy to show that rather than being abstract concepts they are rooted in embodied experience as solitude came to be something both required and desired, particularly for the performance of bodily functions. I will then look at how children constitute their ideas of privacy through their experience of defecating and how adults respond to this. Finally I will consider the paradox of public toilets which confounds the distinction of private and public by forcing the performance of a private act in a public place. What this chapter aims to show is that the modern British idea of excretion as a private act is not just about it being hidden "behind the scenes" in the negative sense of Elias, but that it is part of the cultural performance of defecation and that in hiding the act people are also free to enjoy the solitude, and free to redefine relationships as more or less intimate.

### **The historical constitution of privacy and intimacy**

In recent years the concept of privacy has been debated as a fundamental human right, particularly in relation to people in the public eye such as politicians or royalty and in terms of personal information about individuals, but that this is a modern idea is shown by the work of Barker (1995), Ariès (1989), Elias (1994) and Mellor and Shilling (1997), all of whom locate a change in the way the body was conceptualised and experienced in Western Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Ariès identifies three major changes in social and political life occurring during the early modern period which transformed the way people related to each other, and created a separate private sphere of life from the public arena. These were a change in the role of the state which increasingly intervened in areas previously beyond its reach; new forms of religion which stressed self-knowledge and examination of one's conscience; and the increase in literacy and availability of printed material which led to silent reading and private writing (Ariès 1989: 2-4). These three areas are the focus of the work of Elias, Mellor and Shilling and Barker who focus on, respectively, state formation, transformations in experiences of the sacred, and private diary writing, to consider the changing forms of embodiment during this period.

It is during the sixteenth century that the word *private* seems to begin to refer to a person as well as a place, and to take on meanings of secrecy, seclusion, intimacy and solitude. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites 1574 for the meaning of private as confidential with a person, 1585 for secluded referring to a person (a hundred years after this meaning referred to a place), 1592 for the meaning of by one's self, and 1627 for secretive or reticent. The OED cites only words as they are used in published writing, so it is likely that these meanings were in use in speech before the dates given, although other meanings of *private* are recorded as having been in written use since the fourteenth century, which suggests that the meanings of intimacy and secrecy came in probably during the sixteenth century. *Intimacy* seems to come into use slightly later with the earliest examples from the 1630s, meaning most inward and essential or intrinsic, and close in acquaintance or familiar.

If changing forms of religion, state and literacy transformed the way people related to one another, and allowed for the separation of private space from public, it is perhaps understandable that Ariès refers to England as “the birthplace of privacy” (1989: 5) given the particular conditions of the English Reformation, the English system of parliament and the greater importance of books in England (Chartier 1989: 140). Ariès suggests six areas through which the impact of the changes in state, religion and literacy can be seen most clearly. These are the increased pursuit of self-knowledge through private writing (among Puritans) and confession (among Catholics); the new set of attitudes towards the body that came about through the

development of rules of conduct and etiquette, and explored in detail by Elias (1994) and Revel (1989); the notion of solitude as something to be valued as a pleasure rather than an ascetic hardship or a form of poverty; friendship as a new, private relationship; taste as a way of expressing and presenting the self, with food and home decoration taking on new meanings more removed from utility; and changes in architecture with room sizes becoming smaller, allowing for intimate and private spaces in the home and rooms serving specialised functions (Ariès 1989: 4-7; Chartier 1989:163). All these changes both reflected and helped to constitute the notion of privacy and intimacy as distinct from public life or civility in general, and had consequences for the way bodily functions were performed and considered.

For Barker, it is the separation of private and public into distinct spaces, and the removal of the body from public view, which distinguishes the seventeenth century form of embodiment, illustrated through Pepys' diary writing, from the earlier form with its spectacular bodies. The images of the body in the plays of Webster and Shakespeare are "fully and unashamedly involved in the processes of domination and resistance which are the inner substance of social life" (Barker 1995: 20); it was not, he argues, some perverse attitude of the dramatist that bodies were displayed so spectacularly, but a reflection of the presence of the body in everyday life. By the second half of the seventeenth century, as shown in Pepys' secret diary writing, the body was no longer a spectacle but was hidden away, consigned to a "secret half-life" (Barker 1995: 21), following what Foucault called "the great confinement" (Foucault 1971). The plays of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century reflect "the space of being, the society, the world – what you will – [as] ordered along different lines from those that fissure our own situation", i.e. as divided into public and private (Barker 1995: 30). Using *Hamlet* as an example, he shows how all the action takes place in front of others with no differentiation between public and private. This does not mean that there wasn't "aloneness" but solitude was not a private condition because public and private were not separated. Solitude did not necessarily mean out of sight because "what is seen does not take place in public, so what is not seen by all does not work itself out in private. What is secret in this world [i.e. the world of *Hamlet*] ...does not correspond to that modern condition of privacy in which the Pepysian subject is incarcerated" (Barker 1995: 31). There is no private or public space, but communal space. Ariès also considers earlier pre-modern ideas

of solitude, noting that being alone was seen as a form of poverty, sought after by monks as part of their ascetic life precisely because it was seen as contrary to the human condition.

Barker writes that within this earlier form of embodiment people experienced their place within society not as subjects but as “a condition of dependent membership”. Medical texts and literature illustrate abundantly that the body was structured in the same way as society and the universe in a way that was more than just analogy. People were microcosms, incorporated into the body of the king in its social form so that it was unthinkable to be anywhere else

not because they ‘know their place’ ...but because alterity of placement is always-already encoded as unthinkable. Or at least no more conceivable than the absurd proposition that the arm could take the place of the spleen. (Barker 1995:28)

This society was what Mellor and Shilling call, developing Falk’s work on consumption (Falk 1994), a sacred eating community “which ate into its members but was also eaten into in a mutual devouring of the sacred immanent within natural and social worlds.” (Mellor and Shilling 1997:98); as the faithful consumed the body of Christ, so were they incorporated into His body and the body of the Church. Focusing on experiences of the sacred, Mellor and Shilling argue that what Protestantism did was to abstract people from their surroundings, to separate the word of God from the flesh, and in the process to allow for the emergence of a private self separate from society, which could reflect not only on society but also on itself. This is, for Barker, the birth of the subject and a new form of control based on internal censorship and self-discipline. Now the body became an object for the self to be controlled by the mind:

The subject is cast in on itself, controlled from within by its selves; crippled by struggles and anxieties inside itself; radically undermined by the loss of its own body with which it is ever in contact but whose insistent reminders of a material limit to its subjection, which it cannot quite determine for itself, it must ever attempt to quell. (Barker 1995:55)

As discussed in the previous chapter, Elias’ work on the history of manners traces, through an analysis of books on etiquette from the middle ages to the nineteenth

century, a similar transformation illustrated by the gradual removal “behind the scenes” away from public view, of various bodily activities including excretory functions, along with an increasing restraint of and control over the body and its emotions. He links this to the formation of the centralised capitalist state with a monopoly on control and violence and complex division of functions, founded on the assumption “that every individual is himself regulating his behaviour with the utmost exactitude” and attuned to the needs of others (1994: 446). It was during the seventeenth century that the state also began to control bodies by removing them from public view, as described by Foucault (1971), with the introduction of houses of confinement and new laws to control beggars and the insane.

The process that Elias calls “civilising” is, again, a division between the private and the public where these are not just places but also parts of the self. Unlike eating, about which much was written in the Middle Ages, he finds that little was written about bodily functions in medieval times because there were few prohibitions surrounding this area of life (1994: 110). Elias locates a turning point, however, in 1530 with the publication of Erasmus’ work on manners for children which gathered together much existing wisdom presented in a new way to be of use to everyone. For the first time, embarrassment and shame started to be linked to bodily functions. The book was extremely successful, translated into German, English, French, Czech and Dutch within the space of a few years, and by 1600 several tens of thousands of copies had been printed and distributed (Revel 1989: 172). This work reflects the view of the time that outward behaviour mirrors inner state and disposition of the soul, and conversely the idea that regulating physical behaviour can influence ones dispositions.

What Elias shows in *The History of Manners* is that the privatisation of bodily functions was related to changes in social relationships and not to increased knowledge about hygiene, a point also made by Douglas in her discussion of the Abominations of Leviticus (Douglas 1984). The impulse for repressing the free flow of bodily fluids came from changes in the way people lived together, not from ideas about the causes of illness (Elias 1994:131). The books of manners that he analyses to look at changing attitudes towards eating, defecating and urinating, spitting, blowing the nose, and sleeping, all show what he calls a raising in the thresholds of



tolerance, shame and revulsion; not only were these functions and activities moved into the realm of the private and the intimate, but they were also to be done with more restraint and modesty. Not to behave in the civilised way came to be shameful rather than just a sign of inferiority. In the etiquette books themselves, there is a gradual disappearance of any reference to defecation, reflecting the removal of the act from public life (1994: 111); in later works mention of the subject came to be considered distasteful, but also unnecessary as modesty in these matters came to be taken for granted. Gradually, over the centuries to the present day, Elias finds that the urge to be modest and civil was turned inward, so that eventually people came to act in the socially acceptable way even when alone, for their own sake rather than for the sake of others.

Society is gradually beginning to suppress the positive pleasure component in certain functions more and more strongly by the arousal of anxiety; or, more exactly, it is rendering this pleasure “private” and “secret” (i.e. suppressing it within the individual), while fostering the negatively charged affects – displeasure, revulsion, distaste – as the only feelings customary in society. (1994: 117)

This struggle is illustrated in Elias’ examples on farting. In 1530 Erasmus had stressed that it was dangerous to suppress a fart although one should try to hide the sound with a cough, and should pray with the buttocks pressed together to try to avoid making a noise (Elias 1994: 106). By 1729 La Salle’s book on civility stressed that “it is very impolite to emit wind from your body when in company, either from above or from below, even if it is done without noise; and it is shameful and indecent to do it in a way that can be heard by others.” (Elias 1994: 108). For Erasmus, the person may hide the evidence of a fart with physical means of a cough or clenched buttocks, but should not suppress the fart itself for fear of becoming ill; for La Salle, even if you hide the sound so others are unaware that you have broken wind it is still shameful. The control, and shame if control is lost, are internal and subjective to the farting self. Although the humoral theory of the body was changing by the eighteenth century, there was still a strong belief in the value of evacuating bodily fluids – the popularity of the clyster (enema), especially in France, was reaching new heights during this period (Friedenwald & Morrison 1940) – so La Salle’s insistence that farts be suppressed in the company of others is not likely to be linked to any decline

in the dangers associated with inhibiting body flows. What seems to have changed is the idea of the self in which control of bodily functions is desired less out of consideration for other people, and more out of a sense of one's own integrity as a civilised individual.

What emerges from the work of Elias, Ariès, Barker and Mellor and Shilling is the modern idea of privacy as encompassing both physical and psychic space, with the evacuation of bodily products being moved into both. It wasn't that it had previously been performed publicly, but that before the separation of public and private the place where people defecated was just another part of communal space. With the division of space into private and public came the possibilities of new experiences, such as friendship (freely chosen rather than imposed through family obligation) and intimacy which were based on the sharing of something usually done alone and in private.

The process described by Elias through the evidence of books on etiquette was slow, and it was not until the second half of the twentieth century, when most homes in Britain had at least one indoor toilet for the private use of the household, that excretion was experienced almost entirely as private and intimate. The books published in Countryside Books' Privies series<sup>17</sup> give testimony to the widespread presence of multiple-holed outdoor privies throughout England within living memory which could be used by more than one person at the same time (for example see A. Martin 1998 and Ariss 2000). Most people born and raised in Britain since the 1950s, however, will have grown up with the experience of having a toilet available for their family's own private use, most likely inside their home, in a separate room, able to prevent others seeing them when using it. The degree of privacy and intimacy within the family may vary from homes where the toilet door is rarely closed, to homes where it is firmly locked; but the experience of the toilet as the only acceptable place for faeces, the possibility of concealment and the knowledge that privacy is the norm, the ease with which faeces are removed from our homes, and our lack of daily confrontation with the faeces of others (except sometimes those of our most

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<sup>17</sup> There are currently 28 in the series covering English counties from Bedfordshire to Yorkshire.

immediate family and of our pets) are experiences shared by almost all contemporary British people.

### The constitution of privacy through excreting

Between the ages of about two and about four modern British children go through a process of learning not only to shit out of view of others but that this is a private activity and should not be talked about. They learn the distinction between private and public and a major part of learning this distinction is through their experience of defecating. They learn to control their bowels, their speech and their tempers, all ways in which they project themselves into the world. At the beginning, shitting is unremarkable but often remarked upon<sup>18</sup> (parents often comment on the contents of nappies, sniff babies bottoms to see if they need changing, make reference to smells and noises the baby makes). Soon this changes to being a more focused activity, each excretory event charged with interest and attention as the child learns to notice when it needs to shit, and the carer learns how best to encourage the child to use the toilet. Defecating becomes both remarkable and remarked upon for perhaps the only time in a person's life<sup>19</sup>. This is the time when adults report that their children go through a phase of finding "poo" very funny (although not their own acts of defecation). This is the only time that a person can show their shit to someone else and be congratulated for what they have done, the only period where excreting is celebrated openly, and it is perhaps for this reason that "toilet humour", what Bakhtin would call the universal comic aspect of the grotesque body, is categorised in Britain as childish despite being enjoyed by many adults.

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<sup>18</sup> In a paper at the "Generations" conference (Brunel University, June 2000) Pat Allat talked of "The Mundane" as that which goes without saying, the unremarkable and the unremarked, the trivial. She suggested that life goes on through the mundane elements of the social world that are hidden by their familiarity. Defecation, as unremarked and unremarkable, is a mundane activity, although it ceases to be so as soon as it is brought into focus.

<sup>19</sup> Another time when defecating may become remarkable and remarked upon is when travelling abroad and experiencing the alien mundane of others or the curious changes in one's own body habits and products.

From birth, the child shits unconsciously, unselfconsciously, and although under the scrutiny of others especially the mother, the flow of its excrement is uninhibited although usually contained within a nappy. Soon the child starts to have awareness of its bowel movements and to have some control over when and where it can defecate. Because in the contemporary West the times and places of excretion are restricted in such a way that defecation in the wrong place is highly troublesome, this is a period of some concern to parents and carers of children. It is a period referred to as 'potty training' or 'toilet training', a phrase that recognises that the process may involve some coercion from the adults to force the child to excrete when and where is deemed appropriate. At certain points in British and American history, particularly the 1920s – 1940s, potty training was literally a matter of inculcating a habit in children so they would shit in the pot whenever the adult felt it was appropriate, which process included tying the child to the potty (Hardyment 1983). Since the 1950s, particularly with the infiltration of theories derived from psychoanalysis of problems arising from too harsh potty training, child care books have tended to emphasise following the child's lead and impetus towards becoming self managing of their bowels. Nevertheless, the concept of potty training persists and because of the style of Western toilets, which are usually too high or too big for small children to use comfortably, specific products are marketed for this period to assist in their transition from defecating in nappies to defecating in toilets.

From discussions with middle class British mothers about their observations of their children in relation to excretion, the post-Freudian idea of potty training as something that should be led by the child rather than the parent is clear. What also emerges from these discussions is that the process of a child's constitution of an adult's notion of appropriate excretory behaviour is negotiated over a period of time that starts long before and continues after the period of potty training, and an implicit part of this process is the child's constitution of the notion of privacy.

Freya at the age of three, although fully potty trained in that she no longer wore a nappy and could use the toilet by herself, nevertheless refused to shit anywhere other than in a nappy. When she felt the need to defecate she asked to have a nappy put on, then she went away on her own until she had finished. Helen, her mother, worried

about this and discussed it with me as a problem she wanted to solve<sup>20</sup>. She was also anxious not to make Freya anxious herself, or embarrassed about her behaviour. Helen's solution was to make the process of changing Freya's behaviour fun, (illustrating what Wolfenstein (1955) refers to as "fun morality", an obligation for mothers to make child rearing fun). She set up a chart in the kitchen on which Freya would have a gold star every time she did a poo in the toilet, and when she had achieved a certain number of stars she would have a present. Freya agreed to this and after a few months was using the toilet as her mother wished.

What I am interested in here is that while Freya clearly wanted solitude while she was in the process of excreting, this did not seem to be the same as an adult's desire for privacy. Notions of privacy include out of public view and secrecy as well as solitude and separation, and apply to other people knowing that one is excreting as well as them seeing, smelling or hearing the act. Freya, however, was happy to have a chart recording her bowel movements on public view to her older brother, and family and friends who gathered in the kitchen. Isabel also mentioned the negotiation of privacy during excretion with her daughter. At 2 ½, Jessie was using a potty, and could use it anywhere in the house. One day she was pooing in the middle of the sitting room and another toddler (the son of a friend) approached her. Jessie told him to go away, and, as Isabel expressed it, "it was like she needed her little private enclosure for doing a poo in a way that she wouldn't for a wee". Similarly, Paula remarked that her two year old son had recently started to build himself a "castle" (her description) out of his toys and furniture, and then hide behind it to poo in his nappy. Paula said she would encourage him at this point to go to the toilet but he obviously preferred this solitary and hidden space that he had created for himself. She recognised his need to defecate by this wall building, and in describing this event she imitated her son's actions indicating his pleasure by a secret smile. Several years later, while speaking to Paula on the telephone, she mentioned to me that her 13 month old daughter, who had been sitting on the floor in front of her playing, had moved herself behind her mother in order to defecate. Another mother also mentioned to me that her daughter when still in nappies had always gone away from

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<sup>20</sup> She told me later that the only reason she had worried about it was because her own mother and mother-in-law worried about it, and saw it as a problem that Helen should solve.

everyone else to defecate, adding that in her experience children always did this, and the Great Ormond Street *New Baby and Child Care Book* also states that toddlers will often hide behind sofas or at the end of the garden when passing a bowel motion (Hilton 1997: 384).

Both Helen and Isabel expressed some surprise about the actions of their daughters. Neither thought they had ever given any sense of privacy around defecation, not closing toilet doors or telling children to go out while they were using them (although both women mentioned that their husbands required more privacy for their own defecation), and they wondered why it was that their daughters demanded this solitude when excreting while at the same time neither seemed to care who knew what they were doing, and Jessie was on full view in the middle of the room. Some years after our first discussion on the subject, Isabel told me another anecdote about Jessie who was about 5 by this time. She was playing with her friend but then went into the bathroom to defecate, locked the door, and wouldn't let her friend in. Her friend cried. Later, Isabel asked Jessie why she hadn't let her friend in the room and Jessie said it was because she didn't want to chat to her friend while she was on the toilet. Another time, not long after, Isabel overheard a friend of Jessie's asking Jessie to go away when she went to the toilet; the friend said that she wanted "to be private". Isabel commented that she thought it was funny to hear such a young child using this expression, and concluded that she was probably repeating something she might have heard an adult say because she thought Jessie's friend was too young to know what it meant.

For older children and adults, the privacy of excreting is inextricably linked with feelings of shame, embarrassment and concern for others. For Jessie and Freya, particularly in their pre-school years, their demand for solitude does not seem to be connected to these things. Excretion for adults and older children is an activity that takes place in a specified space that is separated from the rest of the living areas in a house. Even if Helen and Isabel did not close the door or prevent their children from being in the room with them when excreting, both mothers would by the mere action of "going" to the toilet have removed themselves from the activity they had been involved in. The young children appear to desire to separate themselves from others when they excrete, just as their mothers and other older people separate themselves,

even though because they are using nappies or potties they do not necessarily have to leave the room. Because for adults and older children the separation involved in excretion is a necessity (as the space in which we can excrete is limited) and because shame, embarrassment and concern for others are part of the experience, the action of these little children who can excrete anywhere and (apparently) experience none of the emotional affect may seem puzzling. Hilton (1997) suggests that toddlers are seeking a safe and secure place because they feel vulnerable when defecating, although this argument does not explain why they would seek safety by hiding away from their mothers.

One solution to this apparent contradiction can be found in Toren's work on children in Fiji. She suggests that children can invert adult concepts because they pick up on one aspect of the concept before another. She found that in Fiji little children saw status as conferred from external factors, in particular where a person sat, while adults saw status as imminent within the person. Thus a chief was a chief wherever he sat, and the place where he sat was therefore the highest status place, while little children understood him to be a chief *because* he sat in the place that was referred to as "above", and it was the place in which he sat that made him the chief. She concludes that adult behaviour

...presents children with two contrary, but integrally connected aspects of a single concept ...That children constitute the meaning of one aspect of a concept before the other suggests not that it is necessarily the more simple, but that adult behaviour has rendered it the more salient – even when denied.”  
(Toren 1999:115)

From a very early age a child in Britain will be aware that his or her parents and older siblings go somewhere else to excrete, and sometimes this may include telling others to go away and leave them alone, or closing the door. It may be that, following Toren, this is the salient piece of adult behaviour that the little children, still in nappies or using a potty, constitute as part of the process of excretion, long before the shame, embarrassment or concern for others come into play. The adults and older children may be encouraging the infants to take themselves to another place to perform these functions, but what may have been picked up by the child is less the necessity of going to a particular place and more the fact that one goes off and does this alone. Isabel may have been right in thinking that Jessie's friend was merely

repeating what she had heard an adult say about wanting to be private, but in the process she was actively constituting defecation as a private activity and the toilet as a private space both for herself and for Jessie.

At the same time as constituting our concepts of what it means to excrete through our lived relationships with other people, it must also be remembered that our experience of shitting is lived and embodied. To satisfy a need to excrete is to move from a state of discomfort to one of comfort, and this journey is experienced as pleasure (Frankenberg 1992) and there is no reason to suppose that infants and children do not experience this pleasure. Indeed Freud noted, and made much of, the evident pleasure that infants could take in excreting, suggesting that once they learn to control their muscles children may deliberately withhold their stools in order to increase the pleasure of finally letting it out (Freud 1977:210). This aspect is discussed more in the next chapter, but is important to mention here. At the same time that they are giving meaning to their experiences of excreting from what they see other people around them doing, little children are engaged in an activity that gives them strong physical feelings (which may of course sometimes be painful as well as pleasurable); to concentrate on these feelings may also involve a desire for separation, or rather the power of the sensations may drive out the presence of distracting others. Jessie's statement that she didn't want to chat while having a poo, and the other mothers' description of their children's behaviour both suggest that while these children were acting in a way they had constituted as appropriate (that is, separate), they were also expressing an embodied desire for solitude associated with the pleasurable journey from discomfort to comfort. In addition, Freya's request for a nappy perhaps also indicates the pleasure she got from defecating. Isabel mentioned that when her daughter had been ill several months after having finished wearing nappies she had asked to go back to wearing one, which Isabel interpreted as being a reflection of a need for comfort and security. Certainly for adults the idea of the sacred time away from other duties, epitomised by the image of a man reading a newspaper on the toilet, relishes the fact that in our society we excrete alone (see below). We are never pre-cultural, and neither is the behaviour of the children in the examples above, for one thing, they are all making use of cultural artefacts such as potty, nappies and toys. At this early age they have started to define the experience of excretion to involve solitude and separation.



Just at the point where the child has embodied the art of excreting like an adult, including the most difficult skill of wiping ones own bottom (mastered much later than the ability to use a toilet), this activity stops being noteworthy and becomes *unremarked* and *unremarkable*, Pat Allat's definition of the mundane. By the time the child goes to school – and indeed often a prerequisite for admission to school or nursery –they are expected to manage their own bowel functions discreetly and on their own, and not to take an interest in their own or anyone else's bodily functioning.

During all this time, the child is constituting for him or herself a notion of the distinction between private and public, and for their parents or carers too their notion of what is private and what is public will also be reconfirmed. At first, the distinction will be in terms of home and not-home – there will be things the child can do or say at home within the family for which he or she may be punished or reprimanded or prevented from doing in other, more public or less intimate situations. Within the home too there will be distinctions between more or less private spaces such as the bathroom. By the age of five, Jessie's friend had identified the toilet as a private space within the house.

At the same time as constituting ideas of privacy, children are also developing their ideas of disgust. In the examples above none of the little children seem to have expressed disgust at their own or anyone else's excrement. Mothers have mentioned to me seeing their child eating or playing with their faeces, and Sarah, a mother of a two year old, told me about another mother she knew who let her child smear his faeces over the walls of the house, seeing this as his form of expression. However, it seems that whether or not expressly taught by a parent, Euro-American children will eventually come to feel disgust at faeces<sup>21</sup>. As Rozin et al have shown through various experiments, disgust at faeces develops among Western children between the ages of four and eight (Miller 1998: 12). While I do not intend to discuss how or why

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<sup>21</sup> Fortes (1945: 8) writes that the Tallensi do not express disgust at faeces, human or animal, or the smell of it, regarding it merely as essential fertiliser. This suggests that disgust is not an innate reaction, as Freud had implied.

disgust develops or takes the particular forms it does, it is interesting to note that, although my discussions with mothers focused on very young children, there was some indication that disgust started to appear after children started school. Helen told me that her eight year old son had started to be offended by his four year old sister talking about poo at the table; he complained that he couldn't eat his dinner, and sometimes left the room. Miller gives an example from one of his own children, who "felt such a revulsion to feces immediately following her toilet training that she refused to wipe herself for fear of contaminating her hand" (1998: 13). What strikes the adult in these situations is the severity of the disgust expressed by the child which seems out of proportion, but again using Toren's idea of children constituting their meaning of the most salient aspect of a concept first (in this case, that faeces should not be touched) it is not surprising that once picking up on the idea of faeces as dirty children will take it to mean that any contact is disgusting, even the idea that one excretes at all. A teacher of five year olds related the following episode to me. Her class was discussing the vegetables they liked to eat, and one girl said beetroot and added that it made her poo turn purple. The other children in the class gave cries of disgust, indicating that it was the fact that this girl had "admitted" that she excretes that elicited their disgust. The teacher, to prevent the girl from feeling embarrassed, said "oh, I thought everybody poos. Doesn't everybody? I do, don't you?". The children, taking on the teacher's matter of fact attitude then agreed that they did, except for one boy who said that he didn't, and continued to deny that he excreted despite the other children's jeers.

Through their lifelong participation in the cultural performance of defecation, children gradually come to transform their ideas of excrement and privacy until they are more or less similar to adults' ideas. However, as Toren stressed, ideas are continually being reconstituted through new experiences and so our notions of a concept are never complete and unchanging, and are never identical to anyone else's.

### **Private acts in public places**

If excretion is a private act, then it is perhaps not surprising that public toilets are a site of contradiction and anxiety. They are public in the sense of being for everyone's use, and are therefore not private. Legally they are public spaces (hence sex in public

toilets is illegal) and yet people are expected to perform the most private of functions in them. As public is the opposite of private, all the meanings of exposed, open to view, and in the company of other people, are implicit in the idea of a public toilet, all meanings opposed to what is considered the normal or desired site of excretion.<sup>22</sup>

By the time a person in Britain gets to the age of about four or five they not only know that they should defecate in private but they desire to do so, and may be unable to go otherwise. At the same time, children are starting to think of excrement as disgusting and may want to hide the fact that they do it at all. Children find toilets very stressful places at school because they are not private enough. A boy of eight told me that he and his friends would not poo in the toilets at school in case someone knew what they were doing and then went and told “the whole school”. There are always people coming in and out of the toilets, he said, and with gaps at the top and bottom of the doors it is easy for other boys to look into the cubicles. A teacher of infants told me that she suspects that children often excuse themselves from class during lessons to use the toilet when no one else will be around as a way to guarantee themselves a privacy that they have come to expect and demand but that is often denied them. While toilets may provide an appropriate communal space away from teachers, for children they rarely afford an appropriate place for excreting. Toilets at school are a site of ambiguity for children; a place away from the scrutiny of teachers, but also a place to fear as the child is exposed to the gaze of other children. In these places children further constitute their notions of what is both private and public, and disgusting. While parents may have tried hard not to associate shitting with shame or embarrassment, as most of the mothers I spoke to said, it seems to be at school that these feelings emerge most strongly for the first time. For older girls there is the added concern of menstruation which they learn to hide from others.

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<sup>22</sup> I am talking here primarily about shitting in public toilets rather than urinating because there is something far more anxiety producing about the former than the latter. Men in public toilets are expected to urinate in close proximity and full view of one another (though several men have told me that this in itself is not done without anxiety) and women friends sometimes go into one cubicle together to pee. But in both male and female public toilets defecating is expected to take place in a separated space. At the same time, because excrement smells and may not disappear completely, to shit in a public toilet is to potentially invade other peoples' space.

While the anxieties of children may be exaggerated from the point of view of adults, ideas of privacy and disgust, constituted first in childhood, are continually reconstituted throughout our lives. The complex reasons for modern British people generally not wanting other people to be aware of their shitting any more than they want to be aware of others is continually being challenged whenever there arises the need to excrete in unfamiliar or less private or intimate situations. There are, in general, four types of toilet spaces which are available in Britain on a day-to-day basis: the private toilet, which is in one's own home or the home of someone with whom one has an intimate relationship; the private toilet in the home of someone with whom one is less intimate; the toilets at work or school or other confined/defined space (for example, toilets in a pub, club or restaurant) shared with others who may be known more or less well, but with whom there is rarely a sufficient level of intimacy to acknowledge each others' excretory acts; and anonymous public toilets. The experiences of using each type of toilet is different. In the first type, there is generally less anxiety about exposure (to the gaze or excreta of others) because of the shared intimacy with other users of the space, although this can change in an instant if there is someone less intimate in the house. This is, generally speaking, the ideal space for defecation, and as I consider in the next section, can be considered a sanctuary, a place of ease. In the second type there is at least some anxiety about someone else sensing your excretion (hearing, smelling or knowing, rather than seeing) but, depending on the cleanliness of the bathroom, little anxiety about contamination from other peoples' dirt. The third type is semi-public in that there is often more than one cubicle and the other people using them may or may not be known, but these toilet spaces tend to be cleaner and more pleasant to use than the anonymous public toilets in which the danger of pollution can be a greater concern than the worry about being seen. Just as researchers found in discussions of infection from HIV that people did not feel they could be infected by people they knew, so fear in the anonymous public toilet comes from the fact that they have been used by strangers, the dangerous unknown.

The complexities of excreting in unfamiliar or non-intimate places are shown in the following examples from recent conversations and experiences. A man working at the British Library (with whom I had been discussing my research during an interview to join the library) told me that he never uses his staff toilets at work

because his colleagues and friends may be in there; he prefers to use the public toilets where he won't be known. My friend Anne told me that once she needed to defecate while at a friend's house; too embarrassed to use her friend's toilet, she insisted on leaving and going home to use her own (she said that she "needed to go" (i.e. leave) because she "needed to go" (i.e. shit)). She said that defecating at home "can almost be a pleasure" in a way that it wasn't for her anywhere else. Another friend, Bill, when staying as my guest, told me that he had used the bathroom in the pub next door before coming to my house because he "didn't think it was very nice" to use mine. He told me this during a conversation about my study, where we had established the necessary intimacy to discuss these personal issues, but when he had first arrived at my house he told me that he had been in the pub because he thought he was too early and wanted to kill some time by having a drink before coming round. In an office where I worked my female colleagues and I joked about "the poo poo lady" who came from the second floor office up to the fourth floor to use "our" toilets rather than those on her own floor. The only reason we could think of that she would come up once or twice a day (and never acknowledge any of us if she saw us) was that she was defecating there out of embarrassment of using the toilets shared with her work colleagues. We talked about her with some resentment, as, while it was reasonable to allow visitors to use "our" toilets on an ad hoc basis, her regular use was considered an invasion of our private space (one day when one of the toilets became blocked, we immediately blamed "the poo poo lady" for no reason other than she was an interloper, a dangerous other).

As I wrote earlier, intimacy allows a relaxation of privacy, but the examples above indicate that intimacy is not the same as familiarity. For many people the thought of friends or colleagues witnessing the evidence of their excreting is far worse than strangers or those less well known, with whom they have no ongoing relationship. It is particularly through relationships with people with whom one interacts regularly that identity is constituted, and as Lawton shows (2000, see chapter six) the capacity for self-containment is crucial for the Western sense of self. The eight year old boy's fear that someone would "tell the whole school" where one's identity is known and fragile, is not so removed from adult anxiety. As Goffman (1971) wrote, defecation is an activity that takes place "backstage", out of view of an audience; where "front" can be relaxed and preparation made for returning to the front stage area. However,

the backstage region is still very much part of the whole performance of the presentation of self, and in a work or school situation there is always the possibility of someone else entering the vicinity. While they may not be able to see the person in the act of defecating it is likely that they would be aware of the act through smells, noises or the length of time taken, and may also be aware of the person's identity. Of course, we would not expect a work colleague to "tell the whole school", but there is nevertheless an anxiety about damage to the image of the self as clean and, in Elias's sense, civilised. Being able to conceal and control bodily products and acts of producing them has come to be fundamental to Western identity as clean (not dirty), civilised (not savage), human (not animal) adults (not children). As Lawton (2000: 142) argues, "bodily closure, achieved through continence, is a necessary means by which entry into 'full person' status is now gained and sustained."<sup>23</sup> To accidentally reveal bodily products (as opposed to deliberately which will be considered elsewhere) is to risk damaging that identity, unless intimacy with the witness is established to safeguard the sense of self.

An example from my workplace illustrates this. I entered the women's toilets one day just as another work colleague was coming out. This colleague had become a close friend of mine, and our friendship was intimate enough for her to comment that I "should leave it a few minutes" before going in, implying that she had defecated and the smell lingered. I laughed and went in anyway to pee, not bothered by the smell because I knew it was my friend's (although it was unpleasant, it did not cause me to think of her as disgusting). As I was washing my hands, another colleague came in, and I felt concerned that she would think that the smell had been created from my body, but my relationship with her was not so intimate that I felt I could say anything to her about it. Had I made any comment about the smell, I risked being thought strange for even mentioning it, so I left the toilets thinking that she might have associated the smell with me (so may think of me as disgusting). Either way – whether I had mentioned it or not – I felt that the smell of someone else's shit had been attached to me and had damaged my identity.

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<sup>23</sup> This may explain children's anxiety about defecating at school as their identity as full persons is perhaps more precarious given their closer proximity to babyhood.

That this was not just my own anxiety about the opinion of others was shown to me in conversations with other people, such as Anne, who told me that, needing to urinate, she had gone into a public toilet where there was already someone in one of the other cubicles. She said it was so quiet that she was unable to pee until the other woman had flushed the toilet. Anne's knowledge of public toilet experience informed her that the other woman would be able to hear her urinate and this self-consciousness prevented her from being able to go. At the same time, however, she felt embarrassed that she had not made a noise that the other woman could hear, so when she came out and found her still washing her hands, Anne said to her "You were probably wondering what I was doing in there", and explained that she couldn't pee until the other woman had flushed. I asked Anne why she had felt the need to say anything at all to the woman, and she said that it was because she thought it was funny and she felt compelled to tell the woman because she thought it was funny. However, although Anne presented this story as a funny anecdote (as my experience also became after I returned to the office and related the episode and my anxiety to the colleague who had made the original smell), it was less that she wanted to share a joke with a stranger, and more that she wanted, like me, to re-establish what she felt had been a spoiled identity (the stranger may have thought of her as a weird woman who went into a public toilet for some reason other than to excrete). Goffman's idea of spoiled identity is that a person with a stigma of whatever kind is seen as "not quite human" by others (1968b: 15), and may use various strategies for managing that spoiled identity such as drawing attention to it, making a joke about it, avoiding contact with other people, or hiding it and passing for "normal". Goffman notes that familiarity with a person with a stigma can both diminish the sense of spoiled identity and increase it, and "the [stigmatised] individual's intimates as well as his strangers will be put off by his stigma" (1968b: 71). Goffman uses the terms intimacy and familiarity interchangeably, but I suggest that an intimate relationship is different from mere familiarity, and one of the characteristics of an intimate relationship is that identity is not spoiled by revelations of defecation. In fact, revelations of defecation can enhance the intimacy of the relationship, as in my experience described above, where my friend's original comment to me about her smell and my telling her about the other colleague acknowledged and augmented the bond of intimacy between us and also acted to exclude the third person. Anne revealing her action to a stranger as a joke had the effect, for her, of creating a

temporary intimate relationship with the stranger which could then help her to re-establish her identity<sup>24</sup>. Humour can create intimacy between people; a discrete definition of *intimate* in the OED is to describe a theatrical performance that is aimed at establishing “familiar and friendly relations with the audience”, and it is noticeable that stand-up comedians often use scatological material in their routines which both creates intimacy and is legitimate because of the intimate environment.

In a public toilet one’s own excretory function is in danger of being exposed to others, while at the same time one is forced into an unwelcome confrontation with the evidence of other people’s excretion, both situations being contrary to how defecation is constituted as a private act in modern Britain. The public toilet, then, threatens identity in two ways, through the outside coming in and through the inside coming out. The threat of the outside in the form of other peoples’ gaze or other peoples’ excrement is a threat to the bounded self through invasion. This is why, for most Western people, walking in on someone excreting can be as embarrassing for the invader as for the person exposed. So as well as Goffman’s sense of spoiled identity, there is also threat to integrity in Douglas’s sense of danger at the margins. Although Douglas’s interest in body boundaries was in what they can reveal about social structure, her ideas are useful for understanding the embodied experience of the threat of bodily invasion. Under this kind of threat, as Douglas argues, an attempt is made to close off boundaries to preserve integrity, but defecating is precisely the moment when boundaries are being opened to let stuff out. Because to close boundaries would make defecation impossible (although withholding one’s faeces is often an option), instead complicated strategies are adopted for minimising invasion of the other, strategies which aim to prevent other people from seeing or hearing and to avoid having any contact with the corporeality of other people. These are, in effect, “proxemic devices” that help us deal with the unpleasant presence of other people (van der Geest 1998) which is unavoidable in a public toilet. For men and women in modern Britain the strategy is to protect the body from contamination or

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<sup>24</sup> This example suggests that much of what I am saying about defecation applies to urination too, and probably to other bodily exudations, although I doubt whether Anne would have said anything at all to the stranger had she been defecating rather than urinating, preferring instead to have no contact whatsoever with the stranger.



view while maintaining the illusion of privacy (as in hidden and alone) even when in a public place.

In the infamous “worst toilet in Scotland” in Welch’s *Trainspotting* (1994), where the anti-hero Renton loses his opium suppositories, despite the disgusting environment he is pleasantly surprised to find that the lock on the toilet door is intact (1994: 25). He can’t avoid being exposed to other people’s excrement but he can ensure his own privacy against the gaze of others (see Goffman 1971: 123). The locked door of the public toilet cubicle is the main defence against being seen, although in many public toilets the gap at the bottom and top of the door means that the cubicles are not entirely separated. As mentioned above, though, being protected from the gaze of others is not always enough. A friend told me that their holiday in a French campsite was ruined for her husband because the toilets did not provide him the privacy he needed to be able to shit, particularly because there would always be a queue in the morning and the cubicle doors did not reach floor to ceiling. He solved his problem by driving several miles every day to a hypermarket where the toilets were more secluded, less busy and more anonymous. Locked and completely sealed cubicles are not always sufficiently separate however. Mary told me that she would not use one of the automated public toilets that have become a feature of British high streets over the last 20 years<sup>25</sup>, as to do so would feel like she was sitting in the middle of the street. Usually in public toilets there are at least two doors separating the user from the outside world, whereas the automatic toilets have only one. Were the fear of the door automatically opening realised, the user would be exposed not to other users of the facility, but to the world outside (“the whole school”)<sup>26</sup>. Other strategies are designed to minimise the sounds of excreting, like Anne waiting until the sound of flushing hid her noises, or, as several people told me, putting paper into the toilet bowl before defecating to stop any splashing noises; strategies which recall Erasmus’ suggestion to boys that they cough to hide the sound of a fart.

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<sup>25</sup> The first Automatic Public Convenience was opened in May 1982 in Leicester Square, London (Kilroy 1984: 63)

<sup>26</sup> Conversely, a few people have expressed the opposite fear, that the door on the automatic toilet would not open, trapping the person inside. At the bottom of both these fears is the lack of control

As I mentioned above, walking in on someone else using the toilet can be embarrassing for both observer and observed. Similarly, hearing someone else defecating (like hearing someone else having sex) can be experienced as invasive. Goffman cites Kuper's work on the problem of the 'party wall' in British homes, where people complain of the embarrassment of hearing the intimate sounds of their neighbours (1971: 121). The unexpected and unsolicited sharing of an intimacy was problematic for these neighbours (whether these sounds were of excreting, love making or arguing) because the relationships were not established as intimate.

Bryan, a work colleague (another friend with whom these things could be discussed) came back from the toilets one day laughing. He told me that he had been in one of the men's cubicles quietly "having a poo" (as he put it), when he heard a colleague come in and enter the other cubicle. My friend said that he didn't think the colleague was aware that the other cubicle was occupied, and so began – rather noisily – to defecate. This made my friend giggle, which had the effect of loudly releasing his own shit, which in turn silenced the colleague in the next cubicle. My friend hurriedly finished and left the toilet so the identity of each man was not known to the other (although my friend made a suggestion of who he thought it was) and related the story to me. Here, then, was the realisation of a fear (someone *did* tell the whole school, or at least one other person) but this did not in fact damage the identity of either party; my friend became a humorous storyteller and our colleague became merely a character in that story. In this example, my friend did not feel embarrassed or invaded but amused by what he assumed would be the embarrassment of someone else. Nevertheless, this unexpected sharing of an intimacy with someone with whom he was not intimate, was noteworthy enough for him to want to tell someone else about it.

While my friend was more amused than anxious about this mutual invasion of privacy, the sensory reminders of what other people have done before (or alongside) can be experienced as troublesome. The sound of someone else shitting or pissing is

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over the environment experienced in an automatic toilet, as users are aware that the door opens automatically after 17 minutes, and locks automatically during the cleaning process between users.

fleeting, but the visual, olfactory or tangible vestiges can linger long after the producer has left the scene, and can force their way into our consciousness or, worse, our bodies. Several men and women told me of the various strategies they use to avoid physical contact, and sometimes of being explicitly taught these strategies by their parents. Rob said that his father had taught him ways to avoid touching anything when using a public toilet, including the door and the taps, by using his elbows, and this was echoed by Matthew who said he always used his elbow to press the button on the hand drier. On another occasion, a man told me that he felt sorry for women using public toilets because, unlike men, they could not use them without having to touch things, and while he said this he acted out avoiding touching by holding his hands up and mimed using his elbows. For these men, then, the danger of contamination is through touching things with their hands and the strategy is to use the elbows rather than the hands. The experience of this fear was so tangible that even in the telling of their fears all these men acted out using their elbows, exaggerating the attempt to avoid getting germs on their hands. Holding their hands up in this way (arms bent, hands raised, elbows pointing forward) is a recognised embodied response to something disgusting, accompanied by a backwards movement, a “hands off” gesture. It is the gesture of protesting innocence or detachment from guilt or blame, and is also the gesture of surgeons, scrubbed up and ready for the operation, familiar from television programmes. Csordas (1999: 148) points out how gestures reveal the embodiment of culture, and the hands up, elbows out gesture of these men “imitated/incorporated” the surgeons stance, perhaps also suggesting a desire for the same level of detachment from dirt, and of purity as a surgeon about to operate (with gloves and mask). It is a sign of a clean and unpolluted individual, for whom the hands are the protected part. However, the hands are protected because they are the part of the body that will enter or touch orifices (in the case of the surgeon, that will enter the entire body). Holding the hands up in this way not only keeps them clean but also shows to everyone that they are not touching anything (shows that one hasn’t been caught red-handed)<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> This example also illustrates the benefits of using embodiment as a methodology. It was only when I imitated the actions of the men using their elbows that the connections with gestures of innocence and surgeons became clear.

Hands have the power to both pollute and purify. This suggests what the real fear is; not of getting germs on the hands *per se* but that the germs will enter the body through the mouth or anus via the hands. Certain parts of the body have the power to pollute the self, and the hands seem to be the most troublesome because they present “an indeterminate pollution status which depends on what they have touched” (Sutherland 1977: 382). The Western use of toilet paper involves merely wiping the excrement from the anus followed by (ideally) a careful washing of the hands. If excrement is on the hands it is not enough to wipe it off; the hands must be thoroughly washed. At the same time, the Eastern practice of using water rather than paper after defecating is regarded as disgusting by many people born and brought up in modern Britain with the use of toilet paper because of the idea of the hands coming into direct contact with excrement. The British practice of using paper, however, leaves the anus potentially unclean but this does not seem to be a problem.

While the hands are a particularly vulnerable site, avoiding all bare skin contact in a public toilet, while described as protecting oneself from germs, is also a way to maintain the sense of privacy as isolation from others, so integral to our excretory experience, while in a public place. The mouth and nose are obvious orifices through which other people in the form of germs (smells, miasmas) could enter, and so are protected as much as possible. But there is also a fear of penetration/contamination through the anus and (for women) the vagina which cannot be closed off, and which are in fact more open than usual (hence the purpose of being in there in the first place). It probably goes without saying that the dirtier the toilet, the more concern there is about germ invasion. One strategy of dealing with the problem of sitting on a toilet seat on which many other people may have sat, which may even be visibly dirty or wet, is to clean it with paper. Rob recalled once hearing someone in the next cubicle using lots of paper to wipe the seat and being surprised as he had thought he was the only one who did that, although it is recognised enough as a common concern by companies who have identified a marketing opportunity in the production of disposable toilet seat covers (Fitzpatrick 1998). Another friend (in contrast to the men in the paragraphs above) told me that he sits on his hands because he knows he can wash them thoroughly afterwards.

For women, the usual strategy for avoiding touching a toilet seat is to not sit on it at all but to hover slightly above it when urinating (also see Edwards and McKie 1997: 138). A Dutch toilet manufacturer that developed a urinal for women claimed that a survey showed that 99% of women never touch the seats of a public toilet, choosing to hover instead (Arlidge 1999). Medically speaking there is probably more risk of infection for a woman from hovering to pee over a toilet seat and not emptying her bladder completely, than there is from a germ entering her body through her bare thighs touching the seat, but there is more of a sense of invasion from sitting down. To sit directly onto a toilet seat that has been sat on by others is to merge ones body with unknown others who may be less clean than oneself. But this is women's strategy for urinating; for defecating in a public toilet hovering is physically much harder given the height of the seat. From conversations with women, it seems that their strategy for shitting in public toilets is either to wipe the seat, put paper on the seat or avoid going altogether and wait until they are at home. One woman, however, told me that – in defiance of her mother – she “plonks straight down” on the seat, wiping it only if it is wet.

Confrontation with the excrement of others is the main source of anxiety surrounding the temporary public toilets used at large outdoor events such as Glastonbury Festival. At events like this, thousands of people gather together in one place for several days, requiring provision of toilet facilities. When I first went to the festival in 1982 the toilets were wooden benches with holes cut in them over a trough, each hole divided from the next by metal walls and door. Privacy was ensured, but not protection from other people's excrement. In recent years the facilities have improved vastly; the toilets are emptied and cleaned almost daily, there are many more of them, some of them flush (or otherwise remove the excreta from sight) and they are even provided with toilet paper. Nevertheless, given that many thousands more people attend the festival than are catered for, the Glastonbury toilets retain their almost mythic status particularly in newspaper reports about the festival which almost always refer to “traumatic toilet experiences” (Sullivan 1999) or “the essential shared trauma that unites the megastars with the fans in the mosh-pit” (Gibbons 1999). As will be discussed in chapter five, this is an ambiguous experience, but it is one of the rare occasions when people, brought up with the private and privatising

indoor toilet, are forced to open their bodies in close proximity to other people's excrement.

### The constitution of gender in public toilets

As I will discuss in chapter five, defecation is involved in the constitution of gender difference, and our experience of using public toilets is part of this. In Britain we take it for granted that there are separate public toilets for men and for women, while accepting, unquestioningly, that in private houses there is no gender segregation<sup>28</sup>. It is part of our background knowledge about public toilets that they are “places of same-genderedness” in which we take for granted that our relationship with other people within them is one of “same-gender perception”, that someone else entering will be of the same gender as we are (Lindemann 1997: 86). Ian told me how disconcerting he found using public toilets in France where there was no gender division, with cubicles for use by women and men in the same space as urinals. A few weeks ago, I mistakenly went into the men's toilets in a hotel lobby instead of the women's, and experienced a profound sense of confusion and embarrassment. What struck me most, in the seconds before realising what I had done, was how the place looked identical to what I was used to (at this point I had not noticed the urinals) but where there should have been women, there were men. So strong was my embodied knowledge of public toilets as same-gendered places, that rather than the presence of men instantly indicating that I was out of place, I searched for women; I experienced the men as out of place, not myself. Perhaps because I remembered Ian's comments to me about the unisex toilet in France<sup>29</sup>, in my attempt to make sense of the situation in which I found myself, I assumed that this was a communal (male and female) toilet, even though I knew (had the background knowledge) that this was not

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<sup>28</sup> An exception to this are toilets provided for people with disabilities which are expected to be used by both men and women. Also, young male children may be taken into the female toilets by their mothers.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps also because of the unisex toilet facilities in the popular American series *Ally McBeal* currently showing on British television, to which many people referred me.

something that existed in London<sup>30</sup>. It was only when I saw the urinals that I felt out of place, as these so strongly indicate a male space.

Men's public toilets have a sexual element not present in women's public toilets. In part this is because they are recognised potential sites for homosexual contact and liaison, and this can be troublesome for men using the space but not intending to make contact with or have sex with other men. Oring (1979), studying "the principal of personal peeing space" in men's public toilets in America found that to ensure no ambiguity in using the space, "all conversations in men's rooms are loud and can be heard by all present. There is no attempt at whispered or surreptitious communication" (Oring 1979: 18). In contrast, the three Caribbean toilet attendants in Collins' novel *Gents* (2000) use patois specifically as a form of secret conversation to isolate themselves from the predominantly white men who use the toilets for sex: "More than a means of communication between them, it was a bond that excluded others" (2000: 33). Several men have told me that, in fact, there is very little conversation at all at urinals even when they go in at the same time as their friends. Edwards and McKie (1997: 137) cite research showing that men peeing in public toilets take less than half the time of women, suggesting various reasons (such as women's clothes, menstrual needs, queues etc) but they do not consider that men may deliberately hurry up in order to avoid suspicion. Edwards and McKie (1997: 141) suggest that men sexualise excretory functions more in our society than women though without suggesting why. Oring's statement that "in our culture we do not entirely dissociate excretory and sexual functions" is clearly referring to men, as he goes on to say that "because the penis serves double duty for elimination and sex, male urination is likely regarded as a sexual performance." (1979: 20). Oring found three interrelated American values of privacy, masculinity and "cool" that determined patterns of behaviour in using the urinals. First, maintaining the illusion of privacy by not standing next to someone at the urinal if avoidable; second, not displaying "unmasculine" behaviour, such as not being able to urinate; and third, not

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<sup>30</sup> Since writing this, I have been at a central London restaurant with mixed sex toilets. Men and women enter through the same door. Inside there are three cubicles, the first two with a sign on the door indicating they are for women's use, the third for men. I assume that further into the room, passed the cubicles, are urinals, although I did not venture so far. Hand basins are inside the cubicles.

appearing to care about one's bodily functions – “cool is the value that attempts to publicly deny that privacy and masculinity are bathroom issues” (1979: 21). While Oring's statements are specifically about urinating, rather than defecating, they suggest a gendered experience of using a public toilet which would also give specific meaning to the cubicle.

Women's public toilets do not seem to have the sexual connotations of men's. The semi-public toilets of work places, schools and clubs, however, may be a place for social encounters for both men and women, for conversation and the sharing of secrets. Their lack of anonymity removes the association with casual sexual encounters, and with none of the sexual associations that may inhibit men in public toilets from talking or gathering in toilets (unless intending to have sex), they can provide an appropriate place for congregation.

Toilets at work can be sites of informal work discussion. A friend told me that when he had worked in Social Services men had often discussed and planned work projects in the toilet, which the women had found discriminatory and harmful to their careers as it was the one space where they were legitimately excluded. A familiar trope in film and television is of men discussing their work in the toilet. In *Robocop* (dir. Paul Verhoeven 1987), two men are shown at the urinal in the executive bathroom (a sacred space marked by the gold swipe card they need to gain entry) talking about their boss, unaware that the boss is in one of the cubicles overhearing what they are saying. This same scenario occurs in a British television advert for an insurance company in which two men at the urinal discuss the imminent dismissal of a third man who is, unknown to them, in one of the cubicles. These images show the toilet as a site for discussion, but also as a not-entirely-safe environment; the secrecy that is implicit in a toilet space because of its association with privacy, is always precarious because it is, at the same time, a public space and while it may be possible to exclude a large part of the workforce due to the gender division, it will always be open to other colleagues. The semi-public toilet at work, then, is simultaneously backstage *and* front stage, confounding Goffman's distinction.

For women, too, work place toilets offer a site for discussion outside of, but within, the work environment.



The Ladies toilet isn't just a place for excretion. It has a social dimension too. ...Whole conversations take place in the loo, which is prized as a special man-free zone, where confidences can be traded and delicious gossip exchanged. (Burns 1998)

Martin (1989) describes how women could make political use of the toilets at work as a supervisor-free zone, noting references in early twentieth century documents to "groups of two or three girls frequently found in the washroom "fussing over the universe"; ... girls reading union leaflets posted in the washroom during a difficult struggle to organize a clothing factory" (1989: 97). While these gatherings are subversive in themselves, it is also as gendered groups that they become powerful and threatening to the other.

There has been a very recent change in the idea of public toilets for use by males and females with newspapers reporting the introduction of unisex toilets in offices and schools. In April 2000 an office block in the City of London opened a unisex toilet for staff. An unofficial survey carried out by a newspaper (Davies 2000) found that the men they spoke to about the concept were far less accepting of the idea than the women, quoting one man who said that "There are certain activities that should be kept secret from women. It's a personal part of the day." In December 2000 a school's attempt to introduce unisex toilets as an anti-bullying measure was thwarted by the Department of Education and Employment who wrote to the head teacher that "The time is not right for the introduction of unisex toilets in schools ...Concerns have been raised on religious grounds. Also many children welcome privacy when using toilets and washing facilities" (Ward 2000). The fact that these stories were considered newsworthy indicates the strong feelings aroused by the idea of blurring the boundaries in this area.

I will talk more about gender and defecation in chapter five, but this is all I want to say here to suggest that the experience of using public and semi-public toilets is gendered, and from the first days at school (where children constitute themselves as boys and girls partly through their use of the toilets), and even earlier, if taken into public toilets by parents or carers, British people learn the fundamental principle that

men and women do not excrete together<sup>31</sup>. This suggests that it is always already a gendered and sexualised activity for us, through this particular cultural performance.

### Time out

Because defecation is performed in private in modern Britain, the space of defecation – and the act itself – can be a refuge from public life or social interaction. As described at the beginning of this chapter, solitude came to be sought after as a desirable condition only since the seventeenth century. Before that time, solitude was a form of poverty, contrary to the human condition and hard to obtain in the home where there was less division of space into separate rooms or places. Since the seventeenth century, though, solitude and privacy have become desirable conditions, and now, with toilets in the heart of the home, defecation can offer an opportunity for peace and quiet. Anne had indicated this when she said she wanted to leave her friend's house to go home to defecate where it could “almost be a pleasure”, with her newspaper and above all, tranquillity. Similarly, Bill's insistence on using the toilet in the pub next door rather than in my house could also be seen as his desire to defecate uninterrupted, in this case uninterrupted by concerns about offending his host. What I am trying to stress here is that while throughout this chapter I have talked about privacy and the desire to defecate out of sight of other people, the fact that this can be done fairly easily in modern Britain means that concern about other people is not always uppermost in people's minds, particularly when we find ourselves at home, alone. For a large part of our defecatory experience we can enjoy the privacy as a freedom *to*, not just a freedom *from*.

The idea of defecation as offering a period of time out is used fairly often in film and television. In *Lethal Weapon 2* (dir. Richard Donner 1989) the policeman Murtaugh (played by Danny Glover) discovers he is sitting on a bomb while on the toilet in his home, which will be triggered when he stands up. When found by his partner Riggs (played by Mel Gibson) – having been sitting there all night – he starts his explanation stating that for the first time in 20 years, with his wife and children

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<sup>31</sup> This is not just a feature of modern Britain as it seems that in most parts of the world men and women are segregated in the act of excretion, though not necessarily children.

away, he had been enjoying being able to spend as long as he likes in the bathroom with his newspaper. When he indicates to Riggs that the problem is a bomb Riggs looks relieved (presumably because there is no medical i.e. personal problem to be solved but a technical i.e. professional one). Murtaugh is reluctant for his partner to get help as he is sitting on the toilet and he begs for discretion; in the next shot his bathroom and house are surrounded by bomb disposal experts and fellow policemen. What this scene plays on is the cultural idea of the perfect scene of defecation – one's own bathroom in one's own deserted house, with no time limit. Because of the bomb, this becomes a horrible parody of that ideal: because he is alone he cannot get help and is forced to stay in this position for hours until rescued, which involves being exposed to many other people, including non-intimate work colleagues.

The ideal peaceful act of defecation as time out of responsibility is similarly played on in *Pulp Fiction* (1994 dir. Quentin Tarantino) through the character Vince (played by John Travolta). In three scenes in the film his time out in the bathroom is juxtaposed to the drama going on outside. While the diner he has been eating in with his partner is being held up at gunpoint, Vince is shown in the bathroom sitting on the lavatory reading a book with gentle music in the background, oblivious to the drama being played out only feet away. In another scene, he uses the bathroom at his boss's house and is shown washing his hands, and trying to talk himself out of making a pass at the boss's wife who he has been given the task of looking after. Meanwhile, the boss's wife is overdosing on *his* heroin downstairs. In the third scene, we see him coming out of a bathroom, book in hand (indicating that he has been defecating), to be confronted by his own gun in the hands of the man he had been sent to hunt down. He had left the gun behind when he went in to shit, and is then killed with it when he returns to his duties. In all these scenes some major event takes place while he is taking his time out, the final scene being his own death. Time moves on in the film while it stays still for Vince, and parodies the danger of taking time out from responsibility and duty. Had he not left his seat in the diner, he and his partner could more easily have overcome the robbers; had he not left his boss's wife, she would not have overdosed on his heroin; and had he not left his gun behind, he would not have been killed.

The idea of reading on the toilet is integral to this idea of defecation as time out. Although in *Pulp Fiction* Vince is seen reading a book, the more usual depiction of this activity is of reading the newspaper (see figure 1 on page 169). This may have derived from the common practice of using newspaper as toilet paper, cut into squares and threaded onto a nail or string in the old style out-door privies. Several people reminisced about this in Andrew Martin's book on privies in Buckinghamshire (1998). One woman remembered "You always found that you started reading, but never found the end of the article", and another woman said that a favourite pastime "was reading the little squares of newspaper ... You would get interested in an article only to find the next piece didn't run in sequence so you never had the end of the story." (Martin 1998: 71). Silent reading, like defecating for us, is one of the most solitary of activities, a way of cutting out the rest of the world, and linked to the constitution of privacy in the West (Chartier 1989: 124-127). Reading on the toilet implies that time is to be taken (in my family, books were banned from the bathroom in the morning to prevent anyone spending too long and holding up the others). The newspaper is a regular, daily production, a piece of ephemera that will, like the stool, be disposed of after use, and so reading the newspaper and defecating appear as co-constitutive of this daily, repetitive ritual. Obviously, not everyone reads the newspaper on the toilet, but the idea of this activity is available to us<sup>32</sup>.

Taking time out to defecate is also a legitimate reason to interrupt the working day. It is one of the only biological functions that can be attended to in work time, rather than leisure time, unlike sleeping and eating which are carried out in workers' free time (even if paid for a lunch hour this time is seen as free time, a legitimate time not to be working, although workers may choose to work at the same time). Attending to excretory needs is different because of their recurrence and urgency. In the first centuries of industrialisation in Europe and America there were attempts to control workers trips to the bathroom because this was seen as time out of work. Martin reports examples of controls over women's use of the bathroom as this was clearly seen as non-work (1989: 94-97). Workers were expected to use their half hour lunch

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<sup>32</sup> A billboard near Liverpool Street Station in August 2001 advertising the sports section of the Guardian was illustrated with four photographs of toilets made comfortable with a cushion, back rest, rubber ring and tea-making facilities.

break to attend to all personal needs. Foucault (1981) notes eighteenth century pedagogical instructions to prevent schoolboys from congregating when going out to relieve themselves (1981: 28n12). This may not be so rigidly controlled for most workers today, but recent newspaper reports have drawn attention to the poor working conditions in large call-centres (where hundreds of workers are employed to answer telephone calls on behalf of companies), using the fact that visits to the bathroom are severely restricted to epitomise the bad conditions and lack of basic human rights. Some children may also experience controls on their use of the bathroom. A friend told me that in her five year old daughter's school there is a sign up asking parents to ensure that their children go to the toilet before 9 o'clock as teachers had noticed that the children were needing to go as soon as their classes began, and teachers will sometimes not allow a child to go to the bathroom during class as they "should have gone at play time". One of the reasons for these attempts to control time spent in the bathroom is the recognition that these are sites of congregation and possibly rebellion away from the view of employers or teachers, as discussed in the previous section, but another reason is because time in the bathroom is ambiguously work and non-work: as an urgent biological function, defecation is part of the obligatory work of daily life, but as a potentially pleasurable activity legitimising time off it is non-work.

Goffman (1968a) shows how toilets provide a "free place" of relative privacy away from surveillance within the mental hospital he studied. "Regardless of the smell in this section of the ward, some patients elected to spend part of the day there, reading, looking out of the window, or just sitting on the relatively comfortable toilet seats." (1968a: 207). While not actually using the toilets for their intended purpose, the privacy and peace associated with defecation has passed to the space in which it takes place to make that, despite its smell, a site of peace. This sense of toilet as refuge from self-consciousness or the gaze of others is the starting point for the best selling feminist novel *The Women's Room* (French 1978: 7). The opening line has Mira "hiding in the ladies' room. ...huddled for safety in a toilet booth in the basement". Her time out in the bathroom gives her sanctuary from her fellow students on her first day at university, where she feels out of place; in the toilet she finds refuge from other people.

Preventing someone from experiencing this private time out can be traumatic and is considered a form of torture. It is only fairly recently that prisoners in Britain were provided with toilets inside their cells as a fundamental right. A friend, during a recorded interview about defecation, recalled seeing a poem written by a prisoner in Daccau in which the writer expressed his longing to be able to shit alone with a door closed and a newspaper to read, for as long as he wanted. My friend was deeply struck by this, he said “that’s an awful thing to have to do [shit communally, observed by guards], obviously I’m sure there were much worse things, but this was the one thing that they had noticed and had commented, had written about being the worst thing, and that they longed for most.” This reminded me of a television drama about the long term effects of sustained bullying at a public school, in which the victim commented how he relished the holidays when he could defecate without being watched and tormented by the other boys. Again, like my friend’s memory of the poem, this is a vivid recollection of something that struck me as the worst aspect of the bullying, although the details including the name of the play are now forgotten.

Defecation, then, in modern Britain is a private act which is not usually done in the presence of other people, but when it is it can be both destructive (through embarrassment and a sense of spoiled identity) and creative (through the creation or reconfirmation of intimacy between two people). Self-identity is partly constituted through defecation and attempts to control the environment in which the act takes place are attempts to maintain one’s sense of self. However, although the historical constitution of defecation as private and hidden has created the anxieties and stresses entailed in managing this function day to day it has also created the possibility of peaceful time out and the bathroom as a site of refuge. This suggests that while the ability to contain body products and keep them out of sight of others is certainly valued and crucial in the modern Euro-American idea of the fully functioning person, at the same time there is a recognition that releasing body products is a fundamental need that, in the appropriate circumstances, is a source of pleasure. It is to this aspect that I now turn in the next chapter.

# Chapter 4 – Better Out Than In

## Introduction

Defecation is the process of ejecting faeces from the body. However, the immediate, pre-objective bodily perception of this is not of faeces inside, separate from the body, waiting to come out, but of some kind of discomfort, described by Leder (1990: 39) as “a sense of increasing heaviness and fullness near my rectum calling for action”, which is relieved through the release of matter. The last chapter considered the action taken in contemporary Britain in response to this discomfort, which is to take oneself to an appropriate place to defecate, and showed how lifelong experiences of defecating in specific environments constitutes the meaning of what it is to defecate. It was recognised in that chapter that defecating can be pleasurable and welcomed as allowing a moment of solitude, but mentioned only in passing how the sensations of defecating itself contribute to that pleasure.

Frankenberg (citing Jacobs, citing Hirschman) wrote that pleasure is the experience of moving from discomfort to comfort, and comfort is achieved at the point of arrival (1992:11). To feel the need to defecate is to be in a state of discomfort, and the act of excretion is the journey to comfort. This is an apt metaphor given that excretion is talked of in terms of motions, movements, needing “to go”. The state of comfort reached at the end is achieved through the relief at the moment of release, and again this is reflected in our language of “easing oneself”, “relieving oneself”, “dumping”. Defecation, then, is experienced as a process which will bring relief, but can also bring about pleasure on the way, and times when we do not experience pleasure or relief from our bowel movements are more or less disturbing, and may signal sickness or bodily distress.

In Britain today the meanings people make out of these experiences are shaped by the particular ideas and images they have of their internal workings which change over time. In this chapter I will consider excretion as experienced as pleasurable release because it brings an immediate physical sense of relief from discomfort which is also understood as a relief from the possibility of internal damage (from

poisoning or from pressure). This aspect of embodiment also involves the experience of emotions, felt as something that needs to be let out through expression. The imperative to let things out, which Foucault (1981: 59) recognised when he described man as a confessing animal, is based both on the harm that will be caused by holding matter inside and on the idea that what is inside is more true or more valid than what is shown on the surface, particularly if it comes out with a struggle. Excretion appears then not merely as the model or metaphor for these experiences but as part of our embodied way of being in the world in which communication and expression (physical, emotional, spiritual and confessional) is experienced as the path to health and happiness.

### Excretion as release

Feeling a need to excrete is to have a sensation of heaviness pressing on the rectum. This pressure in itself was considered as pleasurable by Freud, who wrote that the bowel contents “act as a stimulating mass upon a sexually sensitive portion of mucous membrane” (1977: 103). Freud suggested that children can learn early on to increase the pleasure by withholding the moment of release. His description of the child deriving pleasure from the act of defecation is echoed by Joyce, suggesting that Freud was describing something experienced by adults as well as children. In *Ulysses* Bloom is described in the outhouse:

Asquat on the cuckstool he folded out his paper, turning its pages over on his bared knees. ...No great hurry. Keep it a bit. ...Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just right. So. Ah! (1986: 56)

Bloom's satisfaction is in the build up and then release of his bowel contents, producing a sensation of relief, the pleasure coming from both the build up and the release.

Freud considered this pleasure as sexual, as he considered all pleasures involving the stimulation of the sensitive mucous membranes (whether oral, anal or genital), but defecation as sexually pleasurable was recognised long before Freud in Western



literature. Greenblatt (1982) shows how Thomas More in the sixteenth century considered defecation “a necessity that God has rendered mildly, if embarrassingly, pleasurable” (1982: 12), and Sir John Harington wrote in 1596 of a man who had said he preferred defecating to having sex; “A jak’s house preferred before a bawdie house” (Harington 1962: 84). More than one person told me, during the course of my research, of people who said they preferred excreting to having sex (although I never met anyone who said this about him or herself). The two “perfect day” scenarios reproduced in chapter 5 (page 171) depict pleasure for the man as almost indistinguishable between defecating, ejaculating or farting. As don Rigoberto thought in Vargas Llosa’s novel (1992), “Shitting, defecating, excreting: synonyms for sexual pleasure? he thought. Of course. Why not?” (Vargas Llosa 1992: 55). Even if we do not accept Freud’s equation of all pleasure with sexual pleasure, there is certainly a long history in the West of recognising defecation as pleasurable.

The pre-objective is never pre-cultural. Producing excrement is something that humans are born able to do as a function of our existence like breathing or hiccuping, but we are always already in social relationships and history and so even as we lie there, not yet differentiating between our bodily functions and sensations, we are surrounded by other people who are aware of, involved in and making meaning out of the process and products of our defecating. By the time we have come to an awareness of our bodily functions we have already started to constitute our ideas about what is happening in a particular historical and cultural way. In Britain babies are kept in close contact with their faeces in the nappy until it is changed in a process that can be fairly ritualised and intimate (on a specific changing mat, using specific cloths or baby wipes, powdering, the communication with the person changing etc.). This presents a particular bodily experience, different, for example, from that of the Tikopian infant which Firth (1963) described in the 1930s, who is not swaddled but is laid on soft bark-cloth; “from time to time its fundament is gently lifted to examine the condition of the bark-cloth beneath. A short supplementary piece of this stuff is kept underneath its body, and changed when necessary.” (1963: 126). Siskind (1975) also implies that Amazonian Sharanahua infants are not swaddled, mentioning that in the 1960s when she did her fieldwork, women slept in string hammocks rather than the woven hammocks that men used, because they slept with infants who could then urinate in the night through the openings in the string hammock, wetting just one or

two strands rather than soaking the tightly woven cloth of the men's hammocks (1975: 31). Paster (1993), in trying to understand the meaning of scatological elements of drama for early modern men and women, suggests that English babies in the fifteenth and sixteenth century were subjected to enemas and purges from an early age, which would have given them a particular bodily experience no longer available to us (1993: 114). The experience of modern British babies through their relationships with their carers, then, will be different from those of Tikopian or Sharanahua babies, or of English babies of a different time. In addition, modern British babies spend a lot of their time lying down (compared to some societies where babies spend most of their time carried against their mothers' bodies) and this, as well as the particular diets of British women while breast feeding (or the particular kind of formula milk used or, later, the kind of solid food), will have an effect on the digestive system of their babies and will play a part in how babies experience the internal workings of their bodies, long before they have even identified the sensations they are experiencing. What I am suggesting is that not only are the ways in which people defecate never pre-cultural, the physical sensations of internal bowel movements are similarly culturally and historically specific.

Defecation is experienced and recognised as being a pleasurable experience because of the physical sensation it provides, and while Freud allowed this for infants, it became clear from conversations and literature during the course of my research that this is the same for adults too. However, this pleasure cannot be separated from the environment in which it occurs and which allows it to take place. Richard told me that he had had "two lovely dumps" while camping in the countryside, describing the experience as "very satisfying, it's really outdoorsy, I feel like a mountain ranger or something", while Anne's desire to go home to defecate rather than use her friend's toilet was not just about avoiding embarrassment but also about actively seeking the situation where it can "almost be a pleasure", alone in her own house with a newspaper. For Richard and Anne, the environment in which they were shitting was part of the pleasure they experienced; it allowed them to relax, a necessary precondition for defecating.

To defecate is to relax the sphincter muscle and release the bowel contents, but this action entails relaxing the whole person. Needing to shit is one of those occasions

when the body dys-appears: “when normal physiology reaches certain functional limits, it seizes our attention. ...It is biologically adaptive that we recall our situation at such moments and that their unpleasantness exert a telic demand for removal.” (Leder 1990: 84). Learning to recognise the specific functional demands as a need to defecate, and gaining the ability to control the sphincter, are considered in the West as major achievements in the child’s development as a person. However, the other part of the process, the ability to then be able to defecate when necessary is not considered a developmental achievement. Freud wrote about children’s wilful efforts to withhold their faeces as acts of defiance (1977: 299), and Erikson (1995: 70-74) sees retention of faeces as expressing the child’s battle for autonomy and control over its environment, and perhaps these two psychoanalysts would have interpreted Freya’s insistence on defecating in a nappy rather than on the toilet, mentioned in the previous chapter, in this way. However, she experienced this as being unable to use the toilet, just as some children feel unable to use the toilets at school, because they do not feel relaxed enough to release their control except under particular circumstances. Constipation in children as a result of their fear of or reluctance to use toilets is discussed in parenting books in terms of a child’s social development (for example, Haslam 1997: 135), but adults also find themselves in similar circumstances where, despite needing to shit, find they are unable to do so. Lorna<sup>33</sup> talked of the difficulties she and her friend used to have in using toilets at work,

*It used to concern me completely, but now it doesn’t bother me in the slightest, but I think that’s just something I’ve grown out of, I mean I know a lot of people have, I know [my friend] used to be completely paranoid about it and would never have a shit at work even if she really really wanted one she’d hold on until she got home because she had to do these things in a building with nobody else in it, ‘cos she was so paranoid about anybody hearing. But no, I don’t think that worries me any more, if I need to go I have to go.*

However, she would still find herself unable to defecate if the toilet was dirty. “I can’t go to the loo if something smells nasty, I just can’t. I’d rather hold on and walk another 300 yards down the street to try and find somewhere where there was a clean

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<sup>33</sup> The following quotes (in italics) are taken from interviews with friends about their excretory behaviour and experience.

one.” In other circumstances, we can experience a desire to defecate but an inability to do so which appears as the inverse of the situation described above. Alison described her constipation in this way

*I do feel like it's all out of my hands, it's just like my body should work in a certain way and it won't, and sometimes whatever you do, you know, eat loads of brown bread, and vegetables, whatever, and smoke loads of fags and even take loads of laxatives, and nothing's going to happen.*

Here, it seemed that her body wouldn't do what her mind wanted to do (release faeces), the inverse of Lorna's experience where her mind wouldn't do what her body wanted to do (release faeces). This is expressed in terms of an unruly body, a conflict between the mind and the body where the compulsion of organic needs comes from pressure on the rectum interpreted as a need to defecate or discomfort elsewhere in the body, interpreted as constipation. However this is a particular historical interpretation (what Leder refers to as a misinterpretation) of a phenomenological embodied and mindful experience. Our visceral body “exhibits an “I must” and “I cannot”; I am compelled by organic needs and functions in a manner over which I have no direct control” (Leder 1990: 136), such as the need to defecate but also the responses of embarrassment and disgust which are experienced corporeally as embodied. Lorna felt that she could not defecate in a dirty toilet; not that her mind wouldn't let her body, but that her embodied response to the surroundings prevented her from being physically able to defecate. What I am suggesting here is, in fact, the crux of my argument; that defecation as a function of biologically social and historical beings is constituted “over time in intersubjective relations with others in the enviroing world” (Toren 1999:12, 21).

Just as responses to embarrassment or disgust are experienced corporeally, so too are ideas about our internal workings. If faeces emerge from our bodies, then they can be imagined as inside the body beforehand, and given that they smell bad and are considered as dirty and unwanted, decaying waste, we can imagine that they can cause harm if left inside. Alongside the sensation of relief from internal pressure, then, there is also in defecation a relief from concern about what is happening inside. Jane said, during a conversation about her past eating disorder;

*I feel very clean and pure after I've been for a shit first thing in the morning and I feel completely hollowed out and clean. ...thinking "that's it, another load of toxins out".*

Her sense of being clean and relieved of a burden is associated with the knowledge that she has got rid of something potentially harmful. Alison said about her experience of constipation;

*Maybe it's physically really bad for you in some way, because shit is all the crap that you're supposed to excrete, I think if it's just hanging around in your body maybe you're reabsorbing all these poisons or whatever, or maybe you're really stretching your bowels. But that doesn't really bother me. What bothers me is that I feel really blocked up, or bloated.*

While she is most concerned about how she feels at this moment, there is also present the ideas about what might be happening inside, even though it is the immediate discomfort that she responds to. Eventually, to relieve her constipation, Alison went for colonic irrigation and she described it as

*almost exhilarating when it was over because, ...you do feel like you've been purged, ... it's just a feeling that it's kind of, kind of a purification feeling, that something's come out*

What emerges from these statements is that defecation or the release of the contents of the bowel can be pleasurable for more reasons than the stimulation of a sexually sensitive part of the body as suggested by Freud. There is a sense of internal cleanness and purity and a relief from feeling heavy or blocked that may come later than the sexual pleasure (since infants have not yet objectified their faeces) but is nevertheless, for the adult, part of the experience. At the same time, these sensations are felt within a particular environment and within particular social relationships, which shape how they are experienced and responded to. The previous chapter focused on those environments and relationships, while this chapter focuses on the sensations and understandings of bodily functioning, but an understanding of the embodied experience of excretion needs to take into account all of this.

### **A very British concern**

A concern with constipation and bowel regularity is regarded as a characteristic of the British by the British. Haslam, a British GP writing about childhood symptoms,

introduces his section on constipation with the statement that “It is fair to say that the British have a thing about their bowels. It is almost as if they believe that there is some innate law that states that everyone shall go to the toilet every day without fail.” (1997: 134). Payer (1989), in her cross-cultural comparison of French, German, British and American medical practice, also found it characteristic of the British to express concern about the regularity of their bowels (1989: 116-118). A daily bowel movement was considered normal, and she cites a survey in which a third of patients defined constipation as not defecating at least once every day. An editorial in the *British Medical Journal* states that “from infancy the British are brought up to regard a daily bowel action as almost a religious necessity” (BMJ 1980: 669). Jonathon Miller considers that “The English ...are obsessed with their bowels.” (1978: 44), and an article in the Guardian, entitled “A Very British Obsession” stated that it is “a very British thing to be hung up about the lavatory” (Burns 1998). Alison said something very similar when recounting an experience from her holiday in Italy with her husband and his family:

*It was so typically English like. After about four days Bill suddenly went “has anyone had a shit yet?” and Rufus said, “Why have you?” and Bill was going, “Well have you?” and then David was going “Well, I haven’t actually”... and anyway, then it got quite a topic of conversation and the next night, Bill was like, “has anyone had a shit yet?” and then the next morning like David would come down with a real grin on his face and he was like, “done it” and everything. And then, I just remember Rufus said, later, “oh, they’re so crude my family” and I said “oh come on, it’s a really British thing on holiday to talk about if you’ve had a shit or not, you’re with your family”*

As well as showing how intimacy within the family allows the subject to be discussed, Alison is also suggesting that to talk about constipation is a particularly British characteristic. Payer quotes an article by a British doctor who wrote that “few doctors, I suspect, have never met the proud Englishman who, no matter how depressed he may seem during his history taking, will respond to the diffident inquiry ‘bowels?’ with a sunburst of triumphant smile and a defiant: ‘regular as

clockwork’.” (O’Donnell 1986 quoted in Payer 1989: 118)<sup>34</sup>. Payer follows O’Donnell in relating this concern or pride in regularity with the regimen of public schools and the army which controlled use of the bathroom and inculcated a regular bowel habit as a duty. O’Donnell suggests in his article that although this was a predominantly middle class phenomenon it became more widespread after the Second World War, perhaps following the experience of National Service.

Concern with bowel regularity is not unique to Britain of course. Loudon (1977) reports that in South Africa small children and new-born infants are regularly given enemas, and older men also regard regular purging as the route to good health (1977: 173). Van der Geest (1998) describes the anxiety among the Ghanaians with whom he lived about not defecating every day. The presence of dirt within the body was seen by the Akan as the major cause of sickness, and without a daily bowel movement, “it is thought that the dirt starts to ferment and heat as in a dunghill” which can cause a variety of symptoms (1998: 9). He found that people start to use laxatives as soon as they have missed a day of going to the toilet and make frequent use of enemas. They were surprised when he told them that he never thought about constipation and had never taken laxatives or an enema.

While a general concern with getting rid of excrement from the body can be found in many parts of the world, it is always historically and culturally constituted. The Ghanaian concern, according to van der Geest, is with heat caused by fermentation, but also to do with their abhorrence of faeces, and to understand this we would need to know more about their explanations about bodily functioning. In Britain, although it seems that excretion has always been valued as necessary for health, how this is understood and experienced has changed over time. So for example, an English person in 1600 would expect a regular bowel movement as part of the ongoing process of expelling excess humours that would otherwise cause imbalance and

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<sup>34</sup> This reminded me of my great-uncle who, when in hospital with a brain tumour, told me and my father how pleased he was that he had been able to open his bowels every day. Slightly embarrassed by this comment, my father responded jovially with “as long as you’ve managed to close them again afterwards” which, in the light of Lawton’s (2000) recent work on dying cancer patients (which

illness, and would take regular purges (as well as sweats, emetics and letting blood) to assist the process. In 1750 a person may have been more concerned about the dangers of infarctus, that faeces would solidify inside and prevent the blood circulating and could use visceral-clysters to administer enemas to keep healthy. For someone in 1900 new ideas about bacteria gave a new danger to constipation as the body could poison itself from the re-absorption of harmful bacteria from unexpelled excreta. Colonic irrigation and surgery were available cures. What is going on in the bodies of the men and women from different periods is understood and experienced differently, according to the ideas they have about themselves. We embody our history and the history of those around us. O'Donnell's understanding of why bowel regularity is typically British reveals his own historical constitution of his ideas about defecation through his experience at public school and in the army, where bowels were regulated and controlled just as were the boys and men, while Alison, with a different experience of growing up in Britain from that of O'Donnell, could also see her husband's family's concern about their collective constipation as "typically English". We are, as Toren says, "remarkably similar to one another in the ways we are different, and wonderfully different in the ways we are the same" (1999: 21) and, as both products and producers of our history, constipation persists as a danger throughout British history, though it changes over time.

### Emotion as release

Descriptions of the processes of defecation (build up, discomfort, release, relief) are almost identical to the descriptions given by the men and women interviewed by Lupton (1998) about their understanding and experience of emotions. She found that emotions were described as feelings in the body that had to be expressed; if they were held in they would cause illness either by causing a build up of pressure or by turning bad and corroding the body from the inside. Several of her quotes describe the feeling of releasing an emotion that are reminiscent of Jane's description of shitting, such as the following:

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stresses the problem presented by some cancer patients who can no longer contain their bodily fluids), now seems rather poignant.



I feel that they [emotions] are an outlet, to keep us from becoming insane.

Tears are for joyousness and sadness – I’ve cried for happiness and sadness and usually about ten minutes after doing it, one feels so much better, so obviously it can only be good. (Lupton 1998: 93)

The idea that crying (releasing emotion) is good for this informant is based, firstly, on her immediate embodied experience, and then on her objectification of the process as a release of something that would otherwise send her mad. Like defecation, releasing what is inside is desirable and necessary for health, and pleasurable as a way of relieving discomfort. If not released, the emotions will build up inside and, as well as harming the body, will eventually force their way out in some other way.

This view of emotions is, according to Soyland (1994), the most common and “ingrained” in Western thought. It is a view which Soyland links to, but which he says predates, Darwin’s idea that “emotions exist within each individual and are expressed – that is, forced out of the body – in appropriate circumstances” as a response to some event and which then prompts action (Soyland 1994: 96). The key point for Darwin, who first published his ideas in 1872, is that emotions are expressive. They start from the inside and are then expressed outwardly in recognised ways (which can vary between cultures). The expression (weeping, shouting, laughing) is not therefore the emotion, but its manifestation. Warhol (1992) refers to this model of emotions as “cathartic”, linking it to Aristotle’s idea of tragic performance, but also arguing that it is a specifically twentieth century view of emotions and not typical of Victorian Europe and America, despite the date of Darwin’s theory. Instead, she proposes that the dominant view of emotions in the nineteenth century was that they were the physical act (weeping, shouting, laughing) which then produced the feeling. This idea of emotions is discussed by Soyland as an alternative model which co-existed with the Darwinian model, that was proposed by William James in 1884 and Carl Lange in 1885. Warhol illustrates the difference between the Darwinian and the James-Lange theories with the example of different styles of acting. The Stanislavski style of “method” acting, as practised by Dustin Hoffman, Robert de Niro and Marlon Brando, means “getting into character” by drawing on personal reservoirs of emotion and feeling in order to vent it in the performance. A gesture then expresses the internal feeling of the actor/character

(Warhol 1992: 113). In contrast, the acting method adapted from the ideas of James and Lange through Delsarte (a nineteenth century philosopher) was based on the total inverse of method acting. Rather than expressing inner emotion, gestures and poses produce those states – “as you stand so you feel and are”. An actress standing in a particular way, with face up, one arm extended behind her with a clenched fist and the other hand to her brow, will feel the sentiment this pose represents (“Mine woes afflict this spirit sore”), “and her bringing it into physical presence will transmit its effects to the spectators” (1992: 114).

Both these views of emotion resonate today, although as both Soyland and Warhol state, the Darwinian theory predominates in the twentieth century. However, rather than taking these as conflicting “theories of emotion”, I take them to reflect experiences of a particular form of embodiment. Other theories about aspects of embodiment emerged around the same time as Darwin’s, James’ and Lange’s ideas about emotions which mirror the concern with either releasing something from inside or effecting inner change through physical stance. Although these seem to be contradictory positions, in fact both are possible within a general mode of embodiment in which the mind can be experienced as separate from the body, with the feelings as somehow connecting the two.

### **Autointoxication, psychoanalysis and confession in the nineteenth century**

In 1887 Bouchard coined the word autointoxication in a paper in which he argued that “the organism, in its normal, as in its pathological state, is a receptacle and a laboratory of poisons ...Man is in this way constantly living under the chance of being poisoned.” (quoted Sullivan-Fowler 1995: 367). Following the revolutionary discoveries of bacteriology in the late nineteenth century (Porter 1997: 428) there was a renewed interest in the dangers of constipation and accumulation of faeces. Substances were identified in the intestinal tract that were a product of bacterial putrefaction of undigested protein, and it was then discovered that these substances (*ptomaines*, from the Greek word for corpse) were poisonous when injected into the bloodstream of animals. From this, it was “an easy jump to the conclusion that ptomaines were absorbed into the human bloodstream from the colon” (Whorton 1991: 7). Following Bouchard’s publication there was a flurry of theoretical and popular papers and books about auto-intoxication, arguing that all disease originated

in the colon from poisoning from putrefied waste, and that constipation was “the dark side of the white man’s burden” (Whorton, 1991: 9), caused by the excesses and poor posture of Western civilised men and women. It was nothing new to argue of the dangers of constipation, but what made it new was the formulation that the problem was re-absorption of chemicals and bacteria from the stool, and that this was a specifically modern problem, a disease of civilisation.

In fact, Bouchard had argued that the danger of autointoxication was from diarrhoea or slow movement of soft stools, not constipation, believing that the hardness of the impacted stools would protect against reabsorption (Alvarez 1919: 9). However, this detail was rapidly overlooked. There was already an idea with a long history that constipation was harmful. As I will discuss later in this chapter, within humoral medicine which had dominated for centuries bodily fluidity was essential for health and so diarrhoea was far preferable to constipation. In the eighteenth century Kampf advocated the doctrine of infarctus, or impacted faeces which needed to be flushed out by the use of clysters (enemas) (Chen and Chen 1989: 436). Sunley refers to child rearing literature between 1820 and 1860 which stressed the need for regular bowel movements to avoid retention of poisonous matter in the body from which “reabsorption would ensue, with dire consequences” (Sunley 1955: 157). The idea that loose and wet stools were harmful to the body was therefore quite alien<sup>35</sup>, and so Bouchard’s ideas were quickly incorporated and extended into a modern and scientific explanation for the known discomforts of constipation.

The theory was supported at first by medical practitioners, one of the most famous being the Nobel prize winner Metchnikoff who argued that “the presence of a large intestine in the human body is the cause of a series of misfortunes” because it acted as a repository of poisonous faecal matter (Chen & Chen 1989: 438). As Sullivan-Fowler (1995) and Whorton (2000) show, an enormous industry abounded between the 1880s and the First World War for the treatment of autointoxication, including pills, tonics, massage equipment, enemas and equipment for more extensive colonic lavage.

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<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that diarrhoea was not considered an illness, but that it was not considered as harmful to the body in itself. It was a symptom of some other problem.

Another medical advocate of the autointoxication theory was the London surgeon William Arbuthnot Lane who cured constipation with surgery, believing that intestinal stasis was “the dominant factor in medicine being the basis of all morbid conditions peculiar to a state of civilisation” (Lane quoted in Chen & Chen 1989: 438-9). Lane’s view is more in line with the James-Lange theory of emotions in that he blamed mankind’s upright posture for intestinal stasis: “as you stand so you feel and are”, in this case – constipated. By changing the physical structure through surgery (removing part of the colon and fixing the intestines to the abdominal cavity to prevent them moving), he believed he would cure the problem. Whereas the other autointoxication theorists cured through release, Lane cured through changing physical structure to speed up bowel evacuation.

The theory of autointoxication began to lose orthodox support early in the twentieth century. In 1913 the Royal Society of Medicine discussed, and rejected, the idea of alimentary toxæmia. A few years later several research based papers were published claiming that the symptoms attributed to autointoxication had a physical origin rather than being caused by poisoning. Donaldson in 1922 published research in which he compared the symptoms of several volunteers after a period of self-imposed constipation and then after having packed their rectums with cotton, finding that the same symptoms were experienced . Three years earlier Alvarez had anticipated these findings with an anecdote about a colleague:

He would often say to me, “It’s no use; my brain is in a muddle; I am dizzy and my head aches so I cannot see; I will quit for the afternoon and go home.” Ten minutes later he would return, perhaps whistling cheerfully, and would remark on the fact that an unhopèd for bowel movement had promptly relieved him of his discomforts.” (1919: 11)

While no one doubted that constipation could cause discomfort and even illness, the idea that this was a result of poisoning was discredited by science.

At the same time that theories of autointoxication were catching the medical and popular imagination, another theory based on the idea that unexpressed matter can cause harm was gaining ground. Freud and Breuer (1991) first published their ideas on the cathartic method as a cure for hysteria in 1893, six years after the publication

of the first articles on autointoxication. For them, catharsis was the method by which a patient recalled and released through hypnosis the memory and affect of an event that had led to a hysterical symptom. An event may produce an affect which would then, ideally, be discharged through a reaction such as crying or acts of revenge (what they refer to as “to cry oneself out” or “to blow off steam”). If the affect has not been discharged (perhaps because the patient suppressed reaction to the event at the time) then any recollection of the event will retain the original emotional affect. By helping the patient recall both what had happened and how they had felt at the time, and put this memory into words, they were able to bring about a cure. The cathartic effect was the discharging of the emotional affect of the traumatic event at the root of the hysterical symptom. Freud and Breuer through hypnosis would arouse emotion in a person and release it, making the patient feel better as a result. What is crucial in their method is not just that the patient recalls the emotion but that they speak it:

The injured person’s reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely ‘cathartic’ effect if it is an *adequate* reaction – as, for instance, revenge. But language serves as a substitute for action; by its help, an affect can be ‘abreacted’ almost as effectively. In other cases speaking is itself the adequate reflex, when, for instance, it is a lamentation or giving utterance to a tormenting secret, e.g. a confession. (Freud and Breuer 1991[1893]: 59)

Freud’s idea of catharsis probably came from an analogy with purgation. In 1857 his wife’s uncle, Jacob Bernays, had published a paper on the Aristotelian notion of catharsis through tragic performance. Bernays influential paper established the idea that Aristotle had meant the catharsis of pity and fear through the performance of tragedy as a purging of pent-up emotion (Janko 1992: 346, Lear 1992: 335n3). This interpretation of Aristotle came to be the accepted view, although since then scholars have argued against him, preferring the idea of catharsis as a purification of emotions or as an education, and suggesting that he had meant something religious, moral or aesthetic rather than medical. Lear (1992) rejects the idea that Aristotle meant catharsis to be a purgation on the grounds that virtuous men would also experience

catharsis but could not have been seen by Aristotle as impure or unclean in any way before hand<sup>36</sup>, but he agrees that the experience is similar.

Now there is a sense in which the interpretation of katharsis as purgation is unexceptionable: having aroused the emotions of pity and fear, tragedy does leave us with a feeling of relief; and it is natural for humans to conceive of this emotional process in corporeal terms: as having gotten rid of or expelled the emotions.(Lear 1992: 315)

He also notes that the preponderant use which Aristotle made of the word “katharsis” was as a term for menstrual discharge, but finds this unhelpful for understanding how Aristotle saw the process of catharsis working through the tragic performance. I am not concerned here with what Aristotle meant, (although Lear’s conclusion that what is important is less the act of catharsis itself and more the fact that it takes place in a safe environment is useful for what I shall say later about control) but I am interested in the idea of catharsis as purgation. Lear sees the idea of catharsis as purgation as no more than an uninteresting metaphor, with corporeal expulsion as a natural process which is available for us as a metaphor for a more complex (cultural) emotional experience. However bodily processes are not just “natural symbols” for emotional experiences of the mind and corporeal discharge is not merely a model through which to describe the relief of emotional expression; rather as embodied mindful persons we experience release as corporeal and emotional. It is not that we conceive of emotion in corporeal terms but that we are embodied and it is a feature of our form of embodiment that we feel internal pressures and burdens that are relieved when what is inside comes out. The fact that catharsis as purgation was such an influential interpretation of Aristotle in the nineteenth century suggests that it made sense at a time when the idea of the benefits of purgation held so strong.

Freud soon abandoned the idea of catharsis through hypnosis in favour of the method of free association, but his work with Breuer had shown him that there were aspects

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<sup>36</sup> Although a comment by Slavoj Zizek on the fly leaf of Laporte’s *History of Shit* states: “In ancient Greek theatres, a hole in the middle of the large stone seats in the front rows allowed members of the privileged classes to undergo a double catharsis – a spiritual purification by which their souls were cleansed of bad emotions and a bodily purification to eliminate bad-smelling excrement.” (in Laporte 2000, back cover). I have not been able to substantiate this comment.

of a person's mind of which neither the person nor the onlooker were aware. This idea of the unconscious as the source of repressed memories and desires that could be brought to consciousness only through analysis parallels the image of the grossly impacted colon of the constipated masses that could only be relieved by the specialist methods of purging developed by autointoxicationists. Similarly, Foucault argues in his study of the history of sexuality that confession became, in the nineteenth century, to be not merely concerned with what the subject tried to hide, but with "what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession in which the questioner and the questioned each had a part to play. ...It had to be exacted, by force, since it involved something that tried to stay hidden." (Foucault 1981: 66). Since the Middle Ages, Western culture has established confession as one of the main rituals for the production of truth (Foucault 1981: 59). The truth is something inside the person that comes out through confession, either willingly or by force and this "obligation to confess" is so deeply ingrained that – Foucault writes – "it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, demands only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation" (1981: 60). Foucault shows that by the nineteenth century confession was no longer just a tool of the church but was essential to the production of truth in medicine, psychiatry and psychology, pedagogy, and criminal justice. As Foucault argued, the truth healed, as long as it was produced in the right way and at the right time to the right person (1981: 67), and the obligation to confess sexual sins is paralleled in the obligation to confess the "sins of the colon" (Hurst 1922: 941) to the autointoxication therapists. Tambling (1990) writes that this idea of confession as a demand to externalise what is inside means that the speech of the confessant "belongs ...to the self, and may be examined as closely as other waste products of the body, themselves classed as defilements, for its deep relationship to the self in its subjectivity." (1990: 3-4). It is no coincidence that under torture, confessants may be told to "spit it out" or "cough up" information (Scarry 1985).

At the same time as the ideas of Bernays, Darwin, Freud and the autointoxicationists seemed to present an understanding of the body as a reservoir of matter that needs to be expelled, the James-Lange perspective presented the alternative outlined by

Warhol. I noted above how Lane's interpretation of autointoxication fitted this alternative. In child rearing literature of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century we also see evidence of this view. Sunley (1955) and Hardyment (1983), in their reviews of child rearing literature, show that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, early toilet training was encouraged through the inculcation of a habit in the infant. Mothers and carers "held out" their babies at certain times, or placed or strapped them onto a chair, and encouraged them by tickling their anuses. By imitating the process of defecating through their physical performance of the act, the aim was to effect the necessary internal processes to produce the desired result. Hardyment shows that this method continued until the 1920s or 1930s. One of the most influential theorists of the time was the American John B. Watson whose book *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* was published in England in 1928. Watson began studying animals before moving onto children, and his behaviourist method is described as follows:

A Watson baby was held out regularly after breakfast. After he was eight months old, he was strapped into a special toilet seat and left alone in the bathroom, with the door closed and with no toys to distract him. Within twenty minutes Watson felt that a bowel movement should occur. If the door was left open, or the mother or nurse stayed, it would lead to 'dawdling, loud conversation, and generally unsocial and delinquent behaviour' (Hardyment 1983: 194)

The various ideas discussed above about autointoxication, catharsis and psychoanalysis, confession and toilet training, reflect what Warhol and Soyland saw as conflicting theories of emotion, but merge when considered as theories of Western embodiment or theories about our material existence and how we become who we are. Internal processes release matter from the body which effect how we feel, and at the same time a person's being-in-the-world effects their internal processes. The behaviourist idea that physical stance creates internal effect is still part of the British experience of embodiment, although less dominant than the cathartic idea. Two recent newspaper reports about laughter as therapy illustrate the persistence of these two aspects. One article (Hall 2000) reports on new research from America which shows a connection with laughter and improved health, in which laughter is seen as the expression of "sense of humour". Researchers asked a group of patients with



heart problems and a control group a series of questions about their emotional responses to certain situations. They found that “those with heart disease were less likely to recognise the humour in a situation”. They concluded that laughter could be a factor in reducing risk of heart disease, and recommended reading something humorous or watching a funny video. Laughter here is the expression of an emotion, and the therapy is to promote that emotion in the patient. In the other article (Thornton 2000), laughter is a yogic technique advocated by an Indian doctor (visiting Britain to promote his ideas) to lower blood pressure. His followers “limber up with breathing exercises, progress to a “ho ho ho, ha ha ha” chant before throwing themselves into chuckling”. The therapy is said to improve health and sense of well being through the physical act of laughing in which a sense of humour is irrelevant. This contrast between releasing what is inside or performing the action in order to produce the internal change was a source of conflict for Alison when suffering from constipation. She was told by her doctor that she should spend time sitting on the toilet in order to bring about a bowel movement, an idea that seemed strange to Alison who said “I just remember thinking, how absolutely ridiculous, either you want to go or you don't, what have you got to sit there and wait for half an hour for?” Performing the action did not make sense to her without the internal sense of need, while her doctor believed that imitating the action of defecating would create the need.

### **Releasing (E)motions in the twentieth century**

Alison chose colonic irrigation to cure her constipation, referring back to the nineteenth century idea of autointoxication. Although autointoxication lost medical support early in the twentieth century, the theory did not disappear. Over the last twenty years there has been a noticeable renewed interest in intestinal toxicity, a phenomenon that Ernst (1997) bemoans as a “triumph of ignorance over science”. Part of this resurgence, suggests Sullivan-Fowler, may be linked to new medical research which has shown that in certain circumstances particular types of toxins can get into the circulatory systems and cause sepsis (1995:388). She shows how this research is being incorporated by alternative theorists into their work to give a kind of orthodox legitimacy (what she calls “pseudoscience”) to their arguments. Another explanation of the recent resurgence is precisely the opposite, however: a suspicion

about science and a turning back to nature as a way to overcome the problems of civilisation. Jensen (1999), a follower of the turn of the century auto-intoxicationists who has been practising since the 1930s, says in the introduction to his *Guide to Better Bowel Care* that “The best is not always what science tells us to do, or what a doctor tells us to do. Better than looking toward science or doctors is turning to nature for a new and better understanding.” (1999:7). This fits in with the increasing importance of green issues in politics and the many recent scares about science’s intervention into nature (such as the CJD scare and genetically modified foods) as well as an overall increase in the use of alternative therapies. In addition, the rise in the incidence of colon cancer linked to the Western diet has led to a new focus on the internal organs.

The late twentieth century idea of auto-intoxication is not identical to that of the early part of the century. The crucial difference is that the poisons are no longer just self-produced, but are a more pernicious and potent mixture of ingested or absorbed products such as synthetic chemicals and heavy metals. The idea of a toxin in the popular imagination (rather than in its more narrow biomedical meaning) has changed to include any kind of substance that is actually or potentially harmful to the body, whether taken into the body from the atmosphere or internally produced. Haas (1992) describes toxins as “basically any substance that creates irritating and/or harmful effects in the body, undermining our health or stressing our biochemical or organ functions”, and this can include negative thoughts and stress as well as car exhaust, pesticides, artificial food additives, cigarette smoke, alcohol and many other external poisons to which we are routinely exposed in our modern toxic times.

This expansion of the idea of toxins and poisons merges the earlier ideas of auto-intoxication with psychoanalytic ideas of the unconscious as a source of internal conflict. Magazine and newspaper articles extol the virtues of detoxification, but this can mean bodily purge (e.g. Doyle 1998), releasing “emotional baggage” (e.g. Wheeler 1998), or clearing out one’s wardrobe (e.g. Slater 1997). The idea of “detoxification” in fact fuses the two contrasting views of emotion that were presented as alternatives by Warhol and Soyland. In popular writing on health and well-being in the late twentieth century, what is inside must come out one way or another. If it cannot come out in the normal way it will find another, usually harmful,

route. Alison, for example, felt that her unreleased toxins were coming out through her skin in spots and rashes, and she described her bloated feeling as being like she was about to give birth to an alien. At the same time, internal processes are influenced by environment (physical and emotional), and so external changes can effect internal workings. Throwing away old clothes or rearranging a room according to the principles of feng shui can make the internal body clearer and healthier (Gentleman 1999). Releasing excrement or emotions, or confessing repressed secrets are considered as similar processes with similar results of improving overall health and well-being. Conversely, withholding matter, whether faeces, feelings, the truth, or clutter, is experienced as a physical and mental burden. A newspaper article by Cook (1995) on detoxification therapies quotes a counselling psychologist talking about irritable bowel syndrome who said that “It’s psychosomatic. For some reason, they can’t express their emotions, and so it comes out in a physical way”. In the same article, a woman describes her experience of following an intensive six-day detoxification:

“There were lots of reactions I hadn’t anticipated. One morning I just couldn’t stop crying – I felt as if I had no control over it.” She was encouraged to let her emotions out and “allow it to happen”. By the end of the week her hunger had subsided and she fulfilled her objective of losing weight. “I started to feel quite light and actually clean inside as though my system had been fluffed up.” (Cook 1995)

While these ideas may be considered extreme or “new age” and are not held by everyone, they are nevertheless becoming increasingly widespread and important in Britain as shown by the large number of articles about detoxification over the past ten years in mainstream newspapers (for example in the Daily Telegraph (Doyle 1998, Vaughan 1998, Slater 1997), the Times (O’Rorke 1999) and the Guardian (Gentleman 1999)) and magazines (such as Harpers and Queen (McKee 1997), Time Out (Lewicki 1989), Zest (Wheeler 1998)).

Colonic irrigation as the most dramatic of the various forms of detoxification increased in popularity following the revelation that Princess Diana was an advocate. It literally cleans out the colon by pumping in gallons of water. It is different from an enema in that the fluid is not retained, a much larger quantity of water is used, and the whole of the colon is washed not just the rectum. The water being pumped into

the colon stimulates peristaltic action and the contents of the colon are expelled through another pipe aided by the therapist who simultaneously massages the patient's abdomen. An important aspect to this therapy is that the patient and therapist can see the contents of the bowel pass through a clear plastic tube.

Colonic irrigation offers a thorough expulsion of excrement, but is also experienced as an emotional release and a confession of (dietary) sin. Margie Finchell, a colonic hydrotherapist, claims that "a lot of people give up going to their analysts" after treatment (Lewicki 1989), implying that physical purgation produces mental clarity. The descriptions people give of how they feel after a colonic do not distinguish between physical and emotional sensations, but suggest an overall feeling of lightness and clarity. Following her colonic, Vaughan (1998) felt "an undoubted sense of lightness, of feeling wide-eyed and zingy. I felt clean, renewed.

...Immediately after the cleanse, my skin was clearer, I felt calmer and more focused." Signorella (1979) also felt "wonderful – high, energetic, positive, and strong" as she climbed off the treatment table. Nina Myskow (1992) felt "light-headed and light of step, bounding with energy ...smug and perky" and Heather Mills was "floating on a cloud" (McKee 1997). The sense of relief and lightness was echoed by Alison who said that she would "come out feeling sort of internally purified and mentally bolstered".

Colonic irrigation is also experienced as confessional. Both times when I tried it myself, the therapist asked many questions about my diet and it felt like a confession to admit to what I eat. It seemed that everything I ate was bad, and the truth was revealed in the colonic process both by the matter expelled and by the ease or difficulty with which the water entered. Alison also describes her colonic experience as revealing a hidden truth. Alison insisted to the therapist that she always chews her food properly, but the truth was revealed in the tube as "you can just see, like whole lumps of carrots and whole sweet corn kernels going past. Oh yeah, chew your food properly do you?". After several months of not having colonic irrigation, Alison went back again and described it as being "almost like you haven't been to church for a while, we haven't seen you round here for a while, you know, and then you know you've really sinned loads, and you've got loads to confess." Alison uses confession here as a metaphor, but her use of this particular metaphor is significant.

In the colonic process, the patient is purged of intestinal impurity and absolved of dietary sins, cleansed and purified and set on a path of righteousness (following my colonic I was given a list of food to avoid and food to eat). Gina Maier (1998) writes of a similar experience in a beauty article about the process of professional facial cleansing (in which the pores are deep cleaned) which, for her, “is like going to confession. I like to be purged, free to start life afresh with a clean, unblemished slate – whatever it takes. There may be a little discomfort, but it’s worth it. (1998:210). Vargas Llosa’s character Don Rigoberto experienced his daily defecation in a similar way:

...there invaded him that intimate rejoicing at a duty fulfilled and a goal attained, that same feeling of spiritual cleanliness that had once upon a time possessed him as a schoolboy at La Recoleta, after he had confessed his sins and done the penance assigned him by the father confessor.

But cleaning out one’s belly is a much less dubious proposition than cleaning out one’s soul, he thought ...what penitent was able, as he was now, to see and (if he so desired) to touch the pestilential filth that repentance, confession, penance, and God’s mercy drew out of the soul? When he was a practising believer – he was now only the latter – the suspicion had never left him that, despite confession, however meticulously detailed, a certain quantity of filth remained stuck to the walls of his soul, a few stubborn, rebellious stains that penance was unable to remove. (1992: 56-57)

While this may seem like an elaboration of the metaphor that Alison used, the sense of lightness following a colonic, combined with having seen the sheer amount of matter that is purged, does leave one with a sense of inner purity and a desire to follow the dietary advice of the therapist. I left the clinic intending to eat only raw food and vegetable juice, and to avoid coffee, alcohol, chocolate, cheese and wheat as instructed. Absolved from sin and given the opportunity to start afresh, it did feel, unlike Don Rigoberto’s soul after confession, that the walls of my colon were free from filth. Drawing on the same experience of releasing some inner tainted truth and being purified in the process, confession and colonic irrigation are – for the lived

body – felt as similar embodied performances<sup>37</sup>, which means that Alison and others can use confession as a metaphor to describe their colonic irrigation, and Vargas Llosa can use defecation as a metaphor to describe his confession.

This connection is shown more clearly in the experience of bulimia as related to me by Jane. Following a binge, Jane would vomit, cry and then confess to her mother; until she confessed to her mother, the cycle would continue. The confession was crucial to her experience, it “would somehow make it not as bad”, but the whole process was one of purgation. She felt that rather than purging because she had eaten too much, she ate too much in order to be sick because of the feeling of purification and release that it gave her. Even while she was vomiting and feeling disgusted with herself, she says that it also felt good, like she was “clearing out”. The tears were an important part of the process, “I’d usually cry when I was throwing up because it was kind of shame tears, whereas when I confessed it was more like that was a big release then”. The final confession was a sign that it was over, and she then felt absolved: “I’m going to be good from now on, kind of thing. Yes, completely clean.” She said that now, not having been bulimic for many years, she could never attain the sense of purification and emptiness that she attained through purging. Although she expresses her feelings (shouting, slamming doors, crying) it is “never quite as dramatic or as effective in it’s kind of “pew” kind of thing”

*In a way, that kind of spacey feeling was quite addictive as well because, especially, [after] I'd been sick but before I'd kind of confessed, where I was kind of a bit spacey, probably because you'd upset all your kind of biorhythms and things, and nothing could quite reach that in terms of, again that's probably why I continued doing it because even when I learned to express things more by saying things or acting angry or whatever, it wasn't quite the same purification that I was looking for.*

Her description recalls the feelings of light-headedness and “floating on a cloud” described by people immediately following colonic irrigation. The importance of the release aspect of bulimia is recognised by some writers on food disorders. Sherman

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<sup>37</sup> While neither Alison nor I are Catholics or have any experience of religious confession, we can draw on our experience of telling (or being made to tell) the truth as the drawing out of a secret and the relieving of a burden.

and Thompson (1990), for example, write that “the release of pent-up emotion, as well as the relief of emptying an over-stuffed stomach, greatly reinforces purging behaviours.” (1990: 84). Another bulimia sufferer wrote that being sick “was like getting the badness out of me. When I binged, sometimes I would be feeling so bad with feelings, emotions, that I would eat and eat and then make myself sick so that when the food came out, so did the feelings and emotions that had been around prior to the binge.” (Eating Disorders Association 1996). Jane said that her experiences of therapy and counselling had not helped her because they focused on her eating rather than her vomiting, and what helped her in the end were two significant relationships, first with a boyfriend and then with her future husband, in which she was able to express emotion safely. For Jane, then, emotional release through crying, physical release through vomiting, and confession to her mother were experienced as parts of the same process of self-expression, of getting the inside out.

### Humoral release in the seventeenth century

I titled the previous section “releasing (e)motions” to express the way in which defecation as one way of getting rid of what is inside is experienced as part of other processes of release. As Lupton found from her informants, emotion, like excrement or the truth, is felt in a Darwinian way as something inside that will force its way out and make us feel better in the process. I have linked these processes to the nineteenth century performances of cures for autointoxication, the catharsis method in psychoanalysis (and Freud’s later technique of free association through which the unconscious would be revealed) and confession. However, the descriptions of twentieth century experiences of releasing what is inside (emotionally, mentally and physically) also recall an earlier historical period to which I turn in this section.

Lupton notes that her informants described their emotions in terms of fluidity (wet or dry) and temperature (hot and cold). Someone who expressed emotion was described as ‘wet’ or ‘gushy’, and as ‘warm’ or ‘hot-blooded’, while people who did not express their emotions were described as ‘dry’ or ‘cold’ (1998: 90). Emotions were described as fluid, and people who expressed them were ‘bubbly’, as opposed to those with ‘stiff upper lips’ who were less excitable and more static. Lupton relates these qualities of solubility and warmth, and of internal movements, to the humoral conception of the body that dominated the theory and practice of medicine from the

Middle Ages until well into the eighteenth century. Paster also notes the vestiges of humoralism in modern day language, “in our propensity to describe ourselves as – and, I suggest, *feel* ourselves to be – “filled” with emotion”. These remnants she describes as the “residuum of error” but she suggests that “to employ the language of an otherwise outmoded bodily self-experience is to be formed in part *by* it” (1993: 7).

An exploration of early modern embodiment reveals that in the pre-Cartesian bodily experience what we now refer to as emotional states were as materially present in the body as excrement and other physical substances, and the qualities of hot, cold, wet and dry were the qualities of material substances. To understand what this meant requires a close examination of the concept of humoral medicine and how it was experienced in every day life. It is worth looking at this in some detail because this can illuminate some of the vestigial elements that may inform contemporary experience.

Medicine in the West until the eighteenth century was dominated by the ideas of the second century physician Galen, based on the ancient Greek system, which saw a person – like the rest of the physical world – as being constituted of the four elements; earth, air, fire and water. These were of a quality according to their temperature and solubility, and were represented in the body as the humours, the substances that flowed through the body making life possible. As medical historians have shown, almost everyone at this time, patients and practitioners alike, subscribed to this humoral view of disease and therapy (Beier 1987, Paster 1993, Wear 1985) and in spite of challenges to this view from influential medics such as Paracelsus in the early sixteenth century and Van Helmont in the early seventeenth, the Galenic system remained dominant well into the eighteenth, and even into the nineteenth century.

The word humour derives from the Latin *humere*, to be moist, a translation of the Greek word *chymos*, meaning juice. Any liquid in the body could be referred to as a humour, but there were four principle humours that governed the functioning of the



whole person. These were blood, phlegm, bile (choler) and black bile (melancholy).<sup>38</sup> The humours had two functions. First, as they were carried through the body in the blood they served to nourish the body and enable it to function by moistening it, keeping it at the correct temperature and removing excrement. This was not a circulation, but a flowing of the blood driven by spirits. Second, the humours determined the character and disposition of a person. A person could be sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric or melancholic in character according to which humour dominated their physical and mental being. A choleric person for example would be angry and quick-tempered like the hot and dry element of fire, while a phlegmatic person would be wet and sluggish and not easily excited. Humours therefore both enabled a person to live and determined his or her character and disposition.

Humours were made in the body through the process of digestion that was understood as the natural heat of the body literally cooking the food and separating the good from the bad. The process continued from the stomach to the liver and on into the blood as it moved through the body. Excrements were produced at every stage and evacuated in the form of faeces, urine, sweat, hairs, nails and mucus. These processes could also produce fumes and vapours inside the body, which would rise up and be evacuated through the pores.

The balance and functioning of the body was influenced by diet, evacuation, air, exercise, sleeping, and state of mind – collectively known as the non-naturals. Proper attention to and moderation in all these areas would maintain a person in good health by keeping the body in the correct state of solubility and warmth. However this balance was precarious, and easily upset. Extremes in weather, lack of or too much exercise, sleep or food, obstruction of the normal evacuative functions, or disturbances in the state of mind could all increase or decrease the body's natural heat and moistness with dire consequences.

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<sup>38</sup> The information on humours and purging has been taken from various texts including: Browne 1981 [1646]; Burton 1989 [1651]; Cary 1611; Crooke 1615; Joubert 1989[1578]; Primrose 1651; Vaughan 1612.

In January 1665 the diarist Samuel Pepys wrote that after walking home during a frost “I find myself, as heretofore in cold weather, to begin to burn within and pimple and prick all over my body, my pores with cold being shut up” (Pepys 1971b: 4). The King’s physician, Helkiah Crooke, tells us in his anatomy book that in winter the inward parts of the body were hotter than in the summer because “all the spirits are immured, and Naturall heate restrained from vaporeing forth” (1615: 61). So by taking exercise, Pepys had further increased his natural heat and the cold weather had caused his pores to close up, thereby preventing the vapours generated by his internal heat from leaving his body causing him to “burn within and pimple and prick”. Another time, suffering the same problem, he cured himself by keeping himself warm and making himself sweat to open his pores and draw out the vapours (Pepys 1971a: 89). In August 1665, Pepys complained of wind which he felt was a result of his eating habits while his wife was away: “when I come to be alone, I do not eat in time, nor enough, nor with any good heat, and I immediately begin to be full of wind, which brings me pain.” (Pepys 1971b: 188). The lack of heat in his stomach produced wind, and from the sixteenth century physician Joubert we learn that wind is caused by huge amounts of phlegm, the cold and wet humour (1989[1578]: 102).

These examples from Pepys illustrate the trouble caused to the body when external influences upset the internal balance. The cold weather caused too much internal heat and prevented the adequate evacuation of the resulting excess humours and vapours, while his lack of food decreased his internal heat causing an excess of phlegm. If Pepys’ internal balance could so easily be upset in the course of everyday life, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that a build up of excess humours was to some extent a normal occurrence, and could be pathological in people who did not pay attention to the non-naturals. A body full of bad humours was called *cachochymic*, and the Italian monk Lessius in his treatise on lifestyle first published in 1615, estimated that over two or three years about 200oz of ill humours could collect. He wrote

Now these humours in tract of time do corrupt and putrifie, and cast a man upon mortall infirmities; and are the very true ground why most men die so much before their time. (1634: 95)

To return the body to a state of balance these excess and putrid humours and vapours had to be evacuated. Keeping the body moist and loose was the most desirable way

to get rid of excess humours and excrementitious substances. Loose motions or diarrhoea, sweating, farting, coughing, menstruation, haemorrhoids, crying etc were all useful ways in which the body cleared itself naturally and it was therefore considered harmful to suppress them. Erasmus wrote in 1530:

There are those who teach that the boy should retain wind by compressing the belly. Yet it is not pleasing, while striving to appear urbane, to contract an illness... Listen to the old maxim about the sound of wind. If it can be purged without a noise that is best. But it is better that it be emitted with a noise than that it be held back.” (quoted in Elias,1994:106)

Harington in his work on the water closet, quotes an epigram from Thomas More on the same theme:

To breake a litle wind, sometime ones life doth save,  
For want of vent behind, some folke their ruine have:  
A powre it hath therefore, of life, & death expresse:  
A king can cause no more, a cracke doth do no lesse.”  
(1962[1596]:100)

As the body was in best health when it was soluble and warm, diarrhoea was not necessarily a bad thing. In December of 1648 Josselin wrote in his diary that “after above 30 houres illnes in my stomacke I fell into a great loosenes which I conceive did me much good” (Josselin 1976). As Primrose said “In health it is good sometimes to bee loose in the belly” (1651: 278-9). Pepys suffered from a looseness when staying in a boarding house one night in September 1665, and was unable to find a chamber pot “so I was forced in this strange house to rise and shit in the chimney twice; and so to bed and was very well again” (1971b). He writes this with no trace of embarrassment at what he had to do, the blame being with the maid who had forgotten the chamber pot. What was most important was that he allowed the free flow of his bowels<sup>39</sup>. Burton saw the retention of any bodily product as a major cause of melancholy: constipation, suppression of menstruation, haemorrhoids or nose bleeds, or lack of sexual activity all had a similar effect, and he cited Galen who

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<sup>39</sup> This episode recalls Harington’s epigram: “One taught an excellent rule to keepe a chimnie from smoking, and a privie from stinking, viz. To make your fire in your privie, and to set the close stool in the chimney” (Harington 1962[1596]: 154n)

wrote that if “naturall seede bee overlone kept (in some parties) it turnes to poyson” (1989 [1651]:230).

In October 1663 Pepys, concerned about the queen’s health, reported that

The King, they all say, is most fondly disconsolate for her and weeps by her, which makes her weep; which one this day told me he reckons a good sign, for that it carries away some Rheume from the head. (1971a: 339-340)

Josselin’s diarrhoea and the queen’s tears worked to relieve the body and mind of the harmful substances within. Since all bodily fluids were produced from the same source they were entirely fungible and to some extent it was the release that mattered not which particular product.

Not only did blood, semen, milk, sweat, tears, and other bodily fluids turn into one another, but the processes of alimentation, excretion, menstruation, and lactation were understood as homologous and hence were less conceptually differentiated than they may be in popular medical understanding now. (Paster 1993:9).

Everyday activities and bodily functions assisted the body in evacuation, but often nature needed to be assisted by artificial means such as purging, induced sweating, letting blood, vomiting and the use of clysters. We can see examples of these in contemporary writing, such as the diaries of Pepys and Josselin, and in the autobiography of Baxter (1615-1691). Niebyl (1972) notes that there had been oppositions to blood letting since the time of Galen, and because blood was both a humour and a vehicle for other humours, care had to be taken not to let out too much. Nevertheless, too much blood (plethora) would cause harm and needed to be released, and blood letting drew it and the bad humours directly from the body. Blood letting does not feature much in Pepys or Josselin’s diaries, although it was used during this period as a cure (Beier 1987: 62-63, Paster 1993: 73-79).

Sweating, vomiting and purging, however, feature often in their daily lives. Pepys’ illness of February 1663 was cured by sweating, following the advice of his doctor: “I am to sweat soundly and that will carry all this matter away; which nature would of itself eject, but this will assist nature”. (1971a: 39). Josselin’s sickness of February 1648 was eased by sweating and vomiting: “I was very sicke for the time, I vomited thrice, phlegme and Choler, my burning fitt was short, and then I lay in a sweatt

untill 3 of the clocke, which sweate spent and wasted the humour”. Baxter considered sweating his main remedy, “for I am seldom well at ease but in a sweat”, which he achieved through exercising, sitting near hot fires, and drinking hot beer (1974 [1696]:12). Vomiting expelled bad humours in an upward motion. Crooke saw vomiting and shitting as two aspects of the same process, one considered natural and the other against nature, but both useful ways to void what is harmful; “so diligent and circumspect is Nature to unburden it selfe of that which is noysome or offensive (1615: 166). Primrose considered vomiting to be “violence unto nature”, but also to be a useful form of expulsion, as it “carries out with it grosse, flegmatick, and other such humours, that stick fast to the stomach, which happily it had never purged out by the stoole.” (1651:278). Vomiting “rids the patient of a lot of excrement, which is thus quickly voided, causing considerable relief” (Joubert, 1989[1578]:94). Vaughan, preferring emetics to purges, went so far as to call vomits “the wholesomest kind of Phisick: for that, which a purgation leaveth behind it, a vomite doth root out” (1612:82).

Despite Vaughan’s praise of emetics, however, the most popular artificial means of keeping healthy and curing sickness in the early to mid-seventeenth century was purging. This was certainly the preferred method of Shakespeare’s son-in-law John Hall; in his case book of patients treated between 1611 and 1635 (edited by Lane 1996), almost everyone (except children and pregnant or post-partum women) was treated with a purge in the first instance, often followed by an emetic and induced sweating. What has to be understood is that purges did not work in the same way as we understand laxatives to work today. Purgative medicine drew the humours to the centre of the body by a process of attraction in the same way that a magnet attracts iron. Particular types of purges would attract specific humours. Ludovicus wrote that “agaric purges phlegm, scammony carries off yellow bile, fidicula moves and expels black bile” (quoted by Temkin, 1972:61), and Donne wrote that we “have Rheubarbe to purge his choller, lest he be too angry, and Agarick to purge his flegme, lest he be too drowsie”(1936[1624]:520). Purgatives would draw the excess humours into the stomach from where they would be purged through the intestines and bowel. This action of the purgatives was one of the reasons why it was considered dangerous to purge during the hottest part of the summer because the heat of the air outside would draw the excess humours to the surface of the body, setting up a contrary motion to

that of the purge. Purging also increased internal heat, which was dangerous during hot weather, and may also be why Hall avoided using them on children who were by their nature hotter than adults (although Paster (1993: 132) claims that purging and enemas were part of normal childhood experience in the early modern period).

Although there is ample evidence that purging medicine was unpleasant (Joubert 1989[1578], Primrose 1651, Donne 1936[1624], Thomas 1971), both in taste and in effect, people took purges regularly, and not just for the curing of symptoms. Lessius recommended “that every yeare twice, namely in the Spring and Autumne, the bodie should be well purged, and cleared of all ill humours” (1634: 93), a view echoed by many other writers of the time. Pepys was a great user of prophylactic physic. He often took pills made by his surgeon Mr Hollier before he went to bed at night, staying indoors the following morning until it had finished working. On May 25<sup>th</sup> 1663, for example, with no mention of any particular ailment such as constipation, he wrote that he had taken one of his doctor’s pills the night before and “it brought a stool or two this morning; and so I forebore going to church this morning, but stayed at home, looking over my papers” (1971a:153). A month later, and again on a Saturday night, he wrote that he took three pills: “Early in the morning my last night’s physic worked and did give me a good stool; and then I rose and had three or four stools and walked up and down my chamber. ...At noon, my physic having done working, I went down to dinner.” (1971a:202). On both of the occasions Pepys’ use of physic seems to be prophylactic, a way to clear himself of excess humours before the start of the summer.

Getting rid of excrement and excess humours both cured disease and maintained a healthy body and mind. From Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* it is clear that there was no material distinction between mental and physical conditions in that the forces (humours and spirits) that enabled people to act, think and feel were material substances in the body. When he wrote that “the Body workes upon the minde, by his bad humours, troubling the Spirits, sending grosse fumes into the Braine; ... so on the other side, the minde most effectually workes upon the Body, producing by his passions and perturbations, miraculous alterations.” (1989[1651]: 247) he meant this in corporeal terms with the movement of actual material substances around the body. Disturbances in internal balance could therefore effect ones relationship with God. In

particular for the Puritan diarists, spiritual life was dependent on a well functioning body, and it was their duty to God to preserve their bodies in good health. Purgation therapies, Schoenfeldt (1997) notes, “offer a physiological version of the spiritual phenomenon of repentance” (1997:254). Josselin, who valued the production of stools to clear away his bad humours, asked God to do the same to him spiritually: “Lord purge the corrupcion out of my heart”(17/11/1648). Around the time of his eight year old daughter Mary’s death in May 1650, in despair at the intensity of his sufferings (his baby son died six days later), Josselin again asked God to purge him through his sufferings. Two days after Mary’s death, he wrote:

This day I had a litle pose<sup>40</sup>, and roughnes of rheume in my throate, my god will ordaine all for my good and make up by the enjoying of himselfe all my losses, troubles and sorrowes and cause them to passe away as the waters, my desires are with David that god would purge and wash mee thoroughly from my sins, oh lett the humour have no setling stay behind if it bee thy pleasure. (1976: 206)

In asking God to purge him Josselin passively emphasised his powerlessness against God’s will. Just as the syrup of roses he took purged him of his choler, so he wanted God to purge him of his sins and make him clean. More than this, it is clear from his diary that it was always God that purged him physically as well as spiritually, as ultimately it was God’s will that the purges worked. As Schoenfeldt says, “God apparently works in mysterious ways, approaching his creatures even through their digestive tracts” (1997:255), or rather, through their bowels. Schoenfeldt shows a more clear link between devotional aspiration and physical purgation in Herbert’s poem *The Rose*. The rose, both a source of sensual pleasure and a purgative, explicitly combines, he says “the airing of one’s inmost sins to the therapeutic removal of humoral excess”: “Repentance is a purge”, wrote Herbert (Schoenfeldt 1997:255). And a purge can be a repentance. Harington recounted the story of a man who never asked nor thanked God for anything, but who was once heard to thank God after he had defecated: “Thus you see, a good stoole might move as great devotion in some man, as a bad sermon” (1962[1596]:92).

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<sup>40</sup> Cold

Purging, as well as the other evacuative practices, was an essential activity in the pursuit of health, happiness and also of spiritual purity. People were encouraged to keep their bodies open and soluble, and from the diaries of Pepys and Josselin, who took great interest in their bodies and bodily products, it seems that the advice was heeded. Within the Galenic system it made good sense to keep the body open and soluble at all times to avoid future problems. Any form of release was valued, whether Baxter's sweating, Erasmus' farting, Josselin's diarrhoea, or the queen's crying (which expressed her emotion *and* drew humours from her brain).

The humoral theory of the body gradually began to decline after the seventeenth century. The growth of the new science with its discoveries about the body and disease such as the circulation of the blood and external causative agents of diseases, made the Galenic models obsolete. In spite of this, as Porter shows, the evacuative cures continued to be practised by doctors and demanded by patients until well into the nineteenth century. He quotes an observer at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London in 1869 who reported that of the 120 patients seen over an hour and 10 minutes, all received a dose of physic consisting mainly "of purgatives; a mixture of iron, sulphate of magnesia, and quassia, and cod-liver oil, fulfilling the two great indications of all therapeutics – elimination, and the supply of some elements to the blood." (quoted Porter 1997: 674). The discovery of auto-intoxication at the end of the century led to a renewed need for purgatives, in addition to the extension of enemas into colonic lavage. Payer (1989) noted in her comparative exploration of medicine in Europe and America in the 1980s, that laxative usage in Britain was higher than in the other countries she looked at, suggesting that the urge to purge continues, whatever the medical explanation for the process.

The parallels between seventeenth century ideas and those of the late twentieth century are striking. The idea of toxins as material substances that burden the self mentally, emotionally and physically recall the humours. Like the humours, toxins can build up and need to be expelled through a variety of ways. In the seventeenth century the body could be relieved through purging, vomiting, bleeding, sweating or crying. In the twentieth century these methods (apart from bleeding, although Skultans (1988) discusses how several of the women she spoke to in South Wales experienced their menstruation as purgative and cleansing) are considered as ways to



detoxify the body and mind. Herbert and Josselin experienced purging as a repentance, just as Alison, Gina Meier, don Rigoberto and I all described experiencing purging as a form of confession.

As discussed in the last chapter, the early seventeenth century was a time of the closing up of the private body, but at the same time the humoral body demanded to be kept open and fluid. Paster notes this “contradiction between a popular medical practice authorizing experiences of somatic uncontrol in the form of humoral evacuation and an emergent ideology of bodily refinement and exquisite self-mastery.” (1993:14). The civilised body, as Elias has shown, was not one that revealed itself to be open and soluble, but to be more like the Bakhtinian classical form – closed, complete and non-porous. It has to be remembered that while the body was being privatised and civilised, it was still being purged and opened on a regular basis. Mellor and Shilling describe the seventeenth century as “Janus-faced” (1997: 131) to describe this dual process in which the Protestant modern form of embodiment challenged and was challenged by the baroque Counter-Reformation resurgence of sensuality. While they argue that the Protestant modern form eventually became the dominant form over the next three centuries, they also suggest that in the late twentieth century elements of the Protestant modern form (characterised by its emphasis of the mind and cognitive experience over the body) combine with the baroque body of the Counter-Reformation (which emphasised sensual passions and carnal knowing) to form what they term the baroque modern body – the form of embodiment that dominates in contemporary times. Their idea of the Baroque Modern body suggests that the late twentieth century experience of embodiment has more parallels with the early seventeenth century than with the nineteenth century in which the Protestant Modern form of embodiment dominated.

### Controlled release

Defecation is the release of waste products from the body in a way that is experienced as a relief from a burden, and as such is welcomed as pleasurable. However, just as we saw in the previous chapter in relation to the environment in which defecation takes place, the control one has over the release is paramount. Where the release is not controlled, such as when control over bowel function has been lost through illness or temporarily through fear, while there may be a sensation

of relief the embarrassment or distress may override any pleasure. Conversely, where the ability to release is impaired the build up inside is experienced as discomfort and may also be experienced as poisoning, and a method of controlled release may be sought to relieve the discomfort through laxatives or colonic irrigation. The idea of release, then, is not about letting go of control but of controlling the way matter is expelled from the body. After colonic irrigation (and sometimes during the process) the practitioner will ask the client to go and sit on the toilet. Water and excrement pours out rather like a bad case of diarrhoea but without the pain or the sense of being ill. This is a controlled form of release, because the client has chosen to undergo the process and is in a controlled environment, even though it would be difficult to prevent the expulsion (as Lear said about catharsis, the crucial point is that the experience is only welcomed if it takes place in a safe, bounded environment). I have also suggested that in bulimia the sufferer may experience her vomiting as a controlled form of release. Jane compared vomiting food during a binge-purge cycle as very different from vomiting when ill because the latter was experienced as out of her control and coming from much lower down than her purging which she described as merely opening her throat. In the final chapter I will say more about the issue of controlled release, but this chapter has shown that being able to release matter from the body is valued as a form of self-control as well as a potential source of pleasure. Being in control of oneself is not, therefore, merely about exerting self-control on an unruly body by closing boundaries and being self-contained but is about being able to respond to corporeal demands appropriately which includes opening up as well as holding in.

## Chapter 5 – The Ambiguities of Excrement

In the last two chapters I considered some of the ways in which excretion is experienced as a daily activity in Britain, and the meanings that are attached to this act. We want to shit because it makes us feel better, it gives us time alone, it makes us feel cleaner and lighter, and it may even provide a sexual pleasure. At the same time, we may try to avoid shitting in certain circumstances because we are embarrassed or ashamed, we don't want anyone to know we are doing it, or because our disgust at the sights and smells of other peoples' excrement inhibits our ability to release our own. We are ambivalent about it as an act, both welcoming it and shunning it, both experiencing it as a source of comfort and of discomfort. As well as being ambiguous in terms of the meanings it has in modern Britain, it is also a marginal activity and product. It takes place on the margins of society as well as at the margins of the body and the fact that now in the West the places of defecation are usually right in the heart of the home – marginal but central at the same time – adds another dimension to this polysemic experience. Little has been said in this thesis so far about the product of excretion but clearly if there is ambivalence about the act then there is even more so about excrement itself, both in a literal sense (excrement as both waste and fertiliser) and in a symbolic sense (excrement signifying death, decay, degradation and all that is low and reviled, but also can represent regeneration and life, truth and honesty).

In this chapter I aim to consider the ways in which shit is imagined and represented in Western culture as both low and vile, and real and true, as both destructive and creative, and as both the symbol of shared humanity/animality and of differences in terms of gender and class. This chapter will show the multitude of paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities that make up modern British attitudes to the products of the living body which is crucial for understanding the ambivalence about one's own excreta and excretory acts as well as for making sense of the role of faeces in humour, art and literature – a role so central that Freud could maintain that art and literature itself is merely a sublimation of our interest in shit.

## Excrement as valued resource

In modern British culture, excrement is regarded as waste matter, what we cast away from ourselves, what we discard after our bodies have taken all the nourishment they need from our food<sup>41</sup>. It is seen as the end product of a process that begins with eating, even though waste food makes up only a small part of the stool (Macpherson 1999: 198). At the same time excrement as manure is a rich source of fertiliser for the land and has the power to regenerate the earth to produce food (Lewin 1999). Rockefeller calls for the use of the word “manure” to describe human excrement because “it carries with it the knowledge that what seems to be waste in one segment of the cycle in reality has value in another” (Sabbath and Hall 1977: 2). This is a knowledge that seems to have been lost in the modern West as the idea of human excrement as fertiliser is unfamiliar in Britain, so much so that in the course of carrying out this research I was told confidently by several people that human excrement cannot be used as fertiliser, in spite of its widespread use in other parts of the world particularly in China and also in Britain in the recent past. The use of night soil on the domestic vegetable garden was common in England until the decline of the privies around 60 years ago. A contributor to Martin’s book on privies in Buckinghamshire (A. Martin 1998), recalling the use of privies in the area up until the 1940s and 1950s, wrote that his father emptied the privy bucket every week “and we had a wonderful crop of vegetables” and another recalled the week that her mother had to empty the bucket: “one of the worst experiences of her life! (Mind you we did have a wonderful vegetable garden – organic gardening is nothing new!)” (Martin 1998: 72). For most people today who have been born and brought up in Britain, however, the literal regenerative power of our shit is forgotten and irrelevant as excreta are flushed away into sewers and treated with powerful chemicals at sewage farms where they are “strained, skimmed, settled, fermented and filtered to render both solid and liquid components as medically, aesthetically and olfactorily inoffensive as is practically feasible and economically possible.” (Lewin 1999: 67). That this takes place in “farms” however suggests a lingering sense of excrement as fertiliser and of sewage works as a site of regeneration, what Laporte (2000) refers to as the alchemy of human waste that “must be filtered through a purifying chemistry

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<sup>41</sup> Malinowski (1932) suggests that the Trobriand Islanders do not link food with excrement in the same way, suggesting that it is not inevitable that excrement is considered the residue of food.

before it can enrich the earth and sprout again as gold” (2000: 34). Laporte writes that “Civilization does not distance itself unequivocally from waste but betrays its fundamental ambivalence in act after act.” (2000: 32). In particular, he finds that the use of human waste as a valuable commodity “is consistently marked by a feigned oblivion of recent practices”. He writes that:

When the discourse of triumphant hygiene introduced the idea of profitable waste in the nineteenth century, not a single enthusiast argued for its agricultural benefits by pointing to the fresh example of its current use in the French countryside. ...Rather, they found justification for the *nec plus ultra* of agricultural technology in the diaries of travellers who had journeyed to China. (2000: 31-32)

Similarly, the revival of waste as fertiliser in the sixteenth century rediscovered the practice from the ancient Romans, rather than contemporary use.

This ambiguity of excrement as waste or valuable commodity is played on in a popular comic book character in Hong Kong called *Excreman*, the product of a piglet’s digestive system, who goes on adventures in the city sewers and whose goal in life is to escape the sewers to become fertiliser for spring flowers<sup>42</sup>. The creator Brian Tse based the character on Raymond Briggs’ Snowman, inverting the pure whiteness of Briggs’ creation but preserving the gentleness and wonder of the original<sup>43</sup>. On the Excreman website, Tse says that the cartoon is intended to show sympathy with the lowest of the low and the last message of Excreman to his friend the pig is “Remember us whenever you see the humblest, the deserted and the despised.” Merchandise produced in conjunction with the cartoon includes a cuddly toy Excreman, very like a teddy bear, which allows the owner to at last play with his or her own faeces. The American cartoon show *South Park* has a similar character, Mr Hankey.

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<sup>42</sup> See the Excreman website [www.excreman.com](http://www.excreman.com)

<sup>43</sup> The link between excrement and snow is made in Böll’s novel *The Clown* where, recalling his dead sister, the protagonist wishes he could hear her voice, even if it was to hear her say “Oh shit” because “From her lips it had not sounded vulgar at all ...it had sounded as beautiful as snow.” (quoted Rollfinke and Rollfinke 1986: 139).

Another earlier use of excrement was in medical preparations. Bourke, disgusted, has as his longest chapter (almost 100 pages) “*Ordure and Urine in Medicine*” (1891: 277-369). He is horrified that even the “nations of the highest development and refinement” have only recently in the nineteenth century “cleared its skirts of the superstitious handprints of the dark ages”. He cites many texts from the Western medical tradition and examples from folk medicine around the world, expanding his collection from mere faeces and urine to include all other bodily fluids and products (including hair, skin and teeth) and even wider to include, among other things, moss growing on human skulls and statues, as well as lice and wool. Beier (1987: 161), in her study of seventeenth century experience of illness, also notes that human or animal excrement was frequently used, categorising this under “magical remedies” (as opposed to religious or secular) although she notes that in fact the people using these remedies made no distinction between magical, religious or rational medicine; as Thomas says, from the patient’s point of view “all medical prescriptions beyond his comprehension were in a sense magical, since they worked by occult means” (Thomas 1973: 226). From the examples in Bourke, human excrement seemed to have been used particularly as a remedy against plague and epilepsy, but is also recorded as a cure for many other diseases and conditions including toothache, fainting spells, consumption, breast cancer, colic, constipation, dysentery, dropsy, and wounds. There is little explanation of why these products were used, although Bourke cites Paracelsus who wrote that “Man’s dung, or excrement, hath very great virtues, because it contains in it all the noble essences, viz. :of the Food and Drink, concerning which wonderful things might be written” (quoted Bourke 1891: 299<sup>44</sup>).

Bakhtin (1984) also considered how excrement had been seen as valuable in Western culture as regenerative but he considered this in symbolic rather than literal terms, and only in connection with its power to destroy. For him, the principle of the grotesque is that “all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images” (1984: 370). In this mixing and combining emerge new hybrid forms, for example Bakhtin discusses at length the passage where Gargantua tells his father about the various objects he

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<sup>44</sup> Although this contradicts what Bourke wrote on the previous page, admiring Paracelsus for his condemnation of excremental substances in medicine.

has used as swabs for wiping himself after defecating. Bakhtin argues that the various items (expensive and luxurious headwear such as hats and scarves, herbs used for cooking and medicine, bed linen, animals) are debased as themselves by being “beshitten” but are regenerated as swabs, judged in terms of their softness and efficiency for this task, “reborn in the light of the use made of them ...they are renewed in the sphere of their debasement.” (1984: 374). This is not excrement itself as regenerative, but the use to which the author puts it by juxtaposing shit and other items.

Bakhtin insists that the regenerative element has been lost in the modern world, and certainly the idea of excrement as fertiliser or curative agent is no longer available to most people in modern Britain (although animal manure remains as valuable nutrient for the soil). However, there remains a sense in which excrement is seen as a creative force. In the last chapter I showed how defecation as a release is experienced and described in similar ways to other forms of release such as emotional expression, confession and catharsis. As an expressive act, an act of releasing something created in the body out into the world, defecation is linked with acts of writing and painting in Western thought. Freud, of course, saw writing and painting as sublimation for defecating, that is, when we write or paint (make dark marks on the paper to produce “the sediment of language” (Laporte 2000: 15)) or mould clay our unconscious recognises this as the first creative act of shitting and enjoys it as the satisfaction of a drive for erotic pleasure.

Whether or not we accept Freud’s theory, there is no doubt that writing and painting are linked in the Western imagination to acts of defecation. Burgess (1982) has his character Enderby, a poet, only able to create his poetry while sitting on the lavatory. In his lodgings he has a special table made so he can sit and write while defecating, and he keeps all his papers and scraps of old poems in the bath. Plagued by digestive problems, he locks himself in his bathroom, ignoring the annoying neighbours, police and landlady that try to interrupt him. “Stripping his lower half for poetic action” he sits down to write a poem for his friend Arry, struggling at first to get anything out:

But, after those first two painful stanzas, he found it hard to stop. He was led on ruthlessly, horrified by a growing facility, a veritable logorrhoea. At the

end of the ode he had emptied Arry's kitchen and filled ten closely written sheets. (1982: 39)

The creative process echoes Enderby's bowel troubles; just before going home to write the poem he visits the toilet in the hotel where Arry works, which he used "long, lavishly and painfully" (1982: 36). Although the statement about Arry's kitchen refers to the content of the love poem he has written, it is also an image of defecating, emptying his bowel<sup>45</sup> especially of the starchy and indigestible food described in the poem of potato peelings, bread, fat and cabbage. Lawrence Durrell (1981) quite self-consciously uses a Freudian metaphor of writing as a form of defecating in *Livia*:

He always had a sneaking fear that what he wrote was too private to reach a reader. Stilted and stunted, the modern product – meagre as spittle or sperm, the result of too rigorous pot-training by his mother who had a thirst for purity. The result was retention of faecal matter – a private prose and verse typical of the modern sphincterine artist. (1981: 3)

He recalls a catatonic poet whose whole life "had been spent in creative constipation, a refusal to give". Durrell makes direct references to Freud and Freudian theory throughout the novel but the appeal of the writing-as-defecation image is that it is rooted in the experience of both activities; the strains of production, a sensation of relief (or perhaps disappointment) in the result. Although both Burgess and Durrell equate writing with troublesome defecation (Enderby has logorrhoea more commonly referred to as verbal diarrhoea, Durrell has constipation), nevertheless the productive processes result in poetry. This link between excretion and writing predates Freudian theory however. The early modern playwright Ben Jonson understood his writing to be a process of digestion (Boehrer 1997), and considered his books as having "a sort of alimentary character, subject to processes of selection, preparation, ingestion, digestion, and excretion that mimic – and ultimately merge with – the literal functions of the digestive tract" (Boehrer 1997: 1).

Creative products can be seen as excrement, and also the process of defecation can be seen to be creative. Michelet, the mid-nineteenth century French historian, wrote in his diaries that, when short on inspiration, "he lingered in latrines in order to

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<sup>45</sup> In early modern English poetry, the stomach was the kitchen of the body (Schoenfeldt 1997)



*inspire* (breathe in) the suffocating stench that awoke in him the spirit of creation” (Laporte: 2000: 37, see also Corbin 1996: 219). Inspiration in the act of defecating is suggested as the very source of the Protestant faith. Mellor and Shilling (1997: 10) place Luther moving his bowels on the privy in a Wittenberg monastery tower when he conceived the doctrine ‘by faith alone’, and use this “evacuation of the body and focus on the mind” as an appropriate place to chart the birth of modernity. Less obviously, but interesting nonetheless, Douglas (1984) reports her discomfort in a particular bathroom as her first example of matter out of place in *Purity and Danger*, the corner stone of her theory of pollution. She writes that the bathroom in question:

had been installed in an old house in a space created by the simple expedient of setting a door at each end of a corridor between two staircases. The décor remained unchanged: the engraved portrait of Vinogradoff, the books, the gardening tools, the row of gumboots. It all made good sense as the scene of a back corridor, but as a bathroom – the impression destroyed repose. (1984: 2)

Douglas does not tell us what she was doing in the bathroom, but the context of her developing argument about dirt and bodily fluids, and her complaint of feeling “unrelaxed” with her repose destroyed suggest that, like Luther, she was inspired in an excremental moment.

Laporte (2000) also links excrement and language through the French sixteenth century concern with cleaning up their language and cleaning up their streets. In 1539 the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets announced that “all edicts, as well as other procedural documents originating in our sovereign courts as well as in subaltern or secondary institutions ...shall be pronounced, registered, and delivered to the appropriate parties in no other than the maternal French” (2000: 3). Three months later a second edict appeared which forbade, amongst other things, throwing waste and filth into the street, and demanded that “all proprietors of houses, inns, and residences not equipped with cesspools to install these immediately, in all diligence and without delay” (2000: 5). While this edict did little, in fact, to rid the city of its sewage problem, it introduced the idea of cleansing into discourse, and referred back to a golden past of the Roman sewers, the *cloaca maxima*, “the signifier of civilization par excellence, more important than concrete and sharing the aqueduct’s status as the ‘very height of civilization’ achieved by Rome.” (2000: 14). Laporte links these two legal texts through the idea of cleansing (the word *latrine* derives

from the word *laver* meaning to wash). Laporte argues for similarities in the drive to cleanse language of its Latin roots, purifying it of diphthongs and waste letters. Just as Rome had refined the Latin language, and built wonderful sewers, so the King would purify French and the streets of Paris (2000: 8).

### Excrement as the lowest of the low

The preceding discussion suggested that there remains in the modern Western imagination the possibility of excrement as creative. However, far more dominant is the idea of excrement as waste and as destructive. Bakhtin argues that in the Middle Ages “every important movement was seen and interpreted only as upward and downward, along a vertical line” and within this hierarchy “all that was best was highest, all that was worst was lowest” (1984: 401). Although he argues that by the time Rabelais was writing this hierarchical world was crumbling, and a new model emerging “in which the leading role was transferred to the horizontal lines, to the movement forward in real space and in historic time” (1984: 403), the vertical hierarchy persists as a powerful image throughout European literature.

The vertical hierarchy is apparent in anything that can be ordered, from social structure to geographical space, and from classification of animal and plant life to art and literature. For Douglas, the human body is the model for this hierarchy. As discussed in chapter two, she argues that the body, something everyone has/is, is “good to think with”, and can stand for any system in the range of human experience. The caste system of the Coorgs of India illustrates her point, as “The whole system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and praying and the most despised parts carry away waste matter” (1984: 123). She sees this as a universal model based on universal human experience. There is evidence from anthropology that this model of bodily hierarchy is not universal (see Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), but it is clearly a central idea in the West which for centuries used the Greek idea of the body of man as a microcosm of the universe. Today, bodily imagery continues to be used to denote hierarchy, as in “heads of state”, “foot soldiers”, etc. The juxtaposition of images from the two extremes of the hierarchy is used extensively throughout Western folklore and literature both to debase what appears to be pure and to exalt what appears to be base. Cinderella, pure

and beautiful, rises from the cinders to the castle; Jack literally climbs up from his humble roots to the giant's castle in the sky; Snow White escapes from the castle and the evil step mother to the lowly house of dwarves who work in the mines, who despite their low stature (both physical and social) are more pure than the wicked queen in the castle.

The notion of a topography of high and low is the subject of Stallybrass and White's book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986). They locate the enduring, pan-European image of a vertically hierarchical structure within four domains of human experience: human body, the psyche, geographical space and the social order. In all of these areas the highest and lowest points are the sites of greatest contrast and interest, although it is the lowest point that is the primary site of contradiction and conflicting desires as it is the low that troubles the dominant social groups so that "Again and again we find a striking ambivalence to the representation of the lower strata (of the body, of literature, of society, of place) in which they are both reviled and desired." (1996: 4).

Stallybrass and White argue that what is low in each of the four domains is respectively transcoded onto each other: maids, prostitutes and beggars at the bottom of the social order are akin to the slum and sewer in the geographical domain, the anus and the genitals of the body, and the evils of the mind or sexual instinct. In the same way there is a linked set of images at the top end: kings, castles, heads and minds, and philosophy or spirituality. They trace the persistence of this image throughout European literature from the plays of Ben Jonson through to the writings of Freud to show that the more the bourgeoisie defined itself as other than the low, the more it created the low as part of itself. The relationship between high and low is ambiguous, and while there is a cultural imperative to aim high, there is simultaneously a troublesome (for the middle classes) desire for what is low. Their explanation for this desire is that as the top attempts to reject the low, it discovers that it is in fact dependent on that very low "as a primary eroticised constituent of its own fantasy life" (1986: 5).

The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what is marked out as 'low' - as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity.

The low was internalised under the sign of negation and disgust. But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. (1986: 191)

Stallybrass and White define three uses of the high/low hierarchy: to invert (to use the low in place of the high to debase or exalt); to demonise the other (that is, to define what is high and low and to exclude the low); and to hybridise (to merge the low and the high into a new form). To illustrate the use of all three at once, they describe Toby the Real Learned Pig, presented at Bartholomew Fair in 1833 as the "Unrivalled Chinese Swinish Philosopher" which combines racial demonisation, an inversion of high and low (a pig in place of a philosopher) and hybridisation as the pig performed human tasks (1986: 58). Pigs, as they spend many pages showing, are closely linked to excrement through the symbolism of the low. Ward (1992) shows a similar use of the imagery of the low in the visual arts. In his essay on an exhibition called "Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine" which was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1991/92 he divides the exhibiting artists into three groups each of which presents dirt in a different way in their work. First are the works which present dirt as associated with the socially low (such as migrant workers, servants, black women), images which invert high and low so that the low other is exalted through being depicted as a beautiful work of art. Second are works which present specific forms of dirt which are abject and threatening to social and symbolic order (menstrual blood, vomit), a depiction of what we wish to cast out and avoid. Third are pieces in which dirt is less visible but in which the displacing of materials from familiar contexts means that "dirt ...resurfaces in works that might be described as hybrids" (Ward 1992: 8).

In spite of Stallybrass and White's distinction between domains of the body, psyche, space and social relations, it is clear that in the end, as Douglas and Bakhtin said, the body, the material lower stratum, is the model for the other domains. Whether the middle class writers they discuss, in their endeavours to distance themselves from the low, are talking about pigs, fairs, prostitutes or slums, they are in fact talking about excrement – product *par excellence* of the grotesque body. Their attempts to sanitise the body and to exclude the grotesque

are quite illusory and it will perpetually rediscover in itself, often with a sense of shock or inner revulsion, the grotesque, the protean, and the motley, the 'neither/nor', the double negation of high and low which was the very precondition for its social identity. (1986: 113)

It is through their association with excrement that pigs, slums, and the poor (from the point of view of the bourgeoisie) are low, not the other way around. Within this symbolic vertical hierarchy, excrement has the power to debase what it touches; to associate something with "shit", verbally or by physically touching, is to destroy it completely.

The Scottish author Irving Welsh uses excrement in this way throughout his novels, most consistently and powerfully in *Filth* (1998) and *Trainspotting* (1994). I will discuss his work at some length here because Welsh's use of scatological imagery illustrates the high/low hierarchy and how it persists as a literary trope. As Stallybrass and White point out, what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central (1986: 5) and although Welsh is considered a "cult" writer, writing about marginal people, both *Trainspotting* and *Filth* were best selling novels during the 1990s, with *Trainspotting* made into an award winning film in 1996.

In *Filth* Bruce Robertson, a policeman, is haunted by his past talking to him through his anus in the form of a tape worm that grows inside his guts during the course of the novel. The tape worm, represented visually on the pages of the novel, at times obscures Robertson's narration, telling the truth while the policeman lies and deceives. The whole novel is a play on the word "filth" with its multiple meanings. Filth is excrement as foul matter, associated with anything that defiles, physically or morally. In the novel Robertson is defiled physically, making repeated references to his stinking unwashed trousers and his infected, inflamed genital area. He is also defiled morally, in his sexual behaviour as well as in his behaviour towards his friends. He also defiles other people, particularly women and particularly sexually although in doing this he also degrades himself. Filth is also a slang term for the police; another term for the police is pig, an animal closely associated with filth in its sense of dirt and excrement, but also used metaphorically to refer to an obscene person. These meanings are shown graphically on the cover of the book which

depicts a large pig's head wearing a small police helmet; the unequal size of the helmet to the head showing Robertson is more pig than policeman.

Despite the abundance of excremental imagery in *Filth*, it is *Trainspotting* that contains the most interesting uses of excrement that draw on familiar tropes in modern British culture. In this novel there are three major scatological scenes in which excrement is deliberately used by Welsh to degrade and destroy through multiple cultural tropes. In the first scene (1994: 14-27), heroin – referred to several times as “shit” – literally becomes so as the main character Renton, having inserted two heroin suppositories, then loses them into a toilet already full of other peoples' excrement. In his desperation for the drug, Renton gropes amongst the foul contents of the toilet to retrieve his “white nugget of gold”. McCarron (1999) interprets this scene as illustrating a heroin addict's hatred of the body, seeing “the grossness of the body, and a concomitant loathing for it” (1999: 312) as an essential aspect of all the fictional works about drug addiction he groups together under the heading of “junk narratives”. Welsh is typical of this genre in that he focuses “on the imperfections of the body, its fundament/tal grossness, so as to offer a tacit explanation of the junkie desire to transcend it.” The use of excrement degrades Renton's body – by the end of the scene he is well and truly beshitten having put his finger up his anus, his arm down the toilet, and knelt on the urine soaked floor – completing the humiliation he suffered previously in scoring the heroin from his dealer. Welsh entitles this chapter “The First Day of the Edinburgh Festival” which emphasises Renton's degradation in a classic high/low hierarchy.

McCarron argues against other critics who have read this scene as depicting gritty realism, saying that it “is not a ‘realistic’ scene, although its major referents are familiar enough” (1999: 312). On first writing about this scene, I also considered it realistic although the abundant use of familiar excremental imagery point to its fictional, mythical quality. What Welsh is doing in this scene is using excrement in familiar ways to degrade heroin (a drug whose effect appears to offer an escape from gritty reality) and to degrade its user. When Renton finds his “white nugget of gold” amongst the excrement – which is depicted in the film by the character descending entirely into the sewer and finding his suppositories gleaming like pearls – we see a

reworking of a familiar metaphor and a psychoanalytic truism; the equation between faeces and gold. Freud wrote in *Character and Anal Eroticism*:

In reality, wherever archaic modes of thought have predominated or persist – in the ancient civilisations, in myths, fairy tales and superstitions, in unconscious thinking, in dreams and in neuroses – money is brought into the most intimate relationship with dirt. ...It is possible that the contrast between the most precious substance known to men and the most worthless, which they reject as waste matter ('refuse'), has led to this specific identification of gold with faeces. (Freud 1977: 214)

Freud here draws on the ubiquity of the myth of faeces = gold which at this point he sees as mere sublimation of the low into the high. Later, in *Transformations of Instinct* Freud adds that the link between money and faeces is also made in the unconscious through the idea of the gift. Faeces is the child's first product, and Freud suggests that the child will consider this as the first gift it produces for its loved one. Later, when the child starts to understand the value of money, the interest in faeces as a gift is transferred to an interest in money. Whether or not we accept the Freudian explanation for the link between faeces and money, it has clearly been linked in the Western imagination for generations. In his multi-lingual dictionary of 1617, Minsheu included under his entry for *jakes*<sup>46</sup> the term "jakes-farmer" which he defines as "a gold-finder, because sometimes hee findes gold therein" (1617: 243), suggesting that finding gold among the dung may not have been unusual (in fact or in fantasy). This theme pervades Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1854) which is largely based on the idea of wealth being found in the dirt. The miser's mounds of dirt are a source of wealth and Silas Wegg spends much of his time poking around the piles looking for the treasure (the miser's last will) which he believes is hidden there. The Rollfinkes (1986), in their study of scatology in German literature, show how one motif represented in the work of the late nineteenth century artist and author Busch is of the nugget of gold in the shit: "The person who does not turn away from excrement but rather is interested in it and inspects it may find himself greatly rewarded". They cite an example from Busch where a street sweeper who walks down the street with his eyes on the dirt finds a leather wallet which a less observant

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<sup>46</sup> Meaning privie

person may have mistaken for “a horse apple in rather squashed circumstances”.  
(1986: 52-53).

Another familiar theme that plays on the high/low imagery in this scene is the, again psychoanalytic, idea of excrement as art, or rather, art as sublimation of faeces. Welsh has Renton writing on the wall with a squashed fly, another excremental signifier, which creative act he describes as a “work of art”. Although intended ironically (Renton has merely written the name of his football team with the entrails of a fly), this plays on the idea of sublimation, the displacement from below upwards, which is central to Freud’s thought, and the idea of excrement sublimated in painting is one of those Freudian ideas that has seeped into the mainstream (“What artist has not looked down at the oily mess of umbers and siennas on the palette, and not seen it as so much formless shit?” asks Searle (1999:12) in a review of excremental themes in art).

In this scene, then, Welsh draws on the familiar imagery of excrement as low and degrading. For Renton, heroin is the most valuable substance he knows, but at the same time he refers to heroin as “shit” throughout the book, puts the suppositories up his anus, and then loses them amongst the sewage. By reworking the familiar equation of faeces and gold, Welsh both conveys the value of heroin to his hero, and debases heroin by showing it to be so much shit. However, in this scene Renton does this to himself, he is the agent of his action and intention and he immerses himself in excrement. The second scatological scene in *Trainspotting* again plays with themes familiar in European culture and folklore but excrement is used within particular relationships with other people to different effect. Here, Welsh draws on the old carnivalesque idea of besmirching, the urban myth of defecating inappropriately in a friend’s parents’ house, the psychoanalytic idea of the parent and child battling for control of the faeces, and the horror of merging excrement with food. When Davie (Spud in the film) wakes up in his girlfriend’s parents’ house after a heavy night of drinking and taking drugs, and finds that he has defecated, vomited, urinated and ejaculated uncontrollably and unconsciously in the bed, he first tries to hide the evidence by bundling it up into the sheet and then accidentally throws it over his girlfriend and her family as they sit eating their Sunday breakfast (1994: 91-94).



The whole scene is a reworking of an urban myth in which the crucial elements are being in a strange place, not being able to excrete in the appropriate place, and being discovered. In one myth, someone staying in a large and unfamiliar house cannot find the bathroom during the night, so defecates in a pot and throws it out of the window, only to discover in the morning that it has landed on the glass roof of the breakfast room. In another, a guest not being able to find the bathroom, tries to use the sink as a toilet and brings the basin and pipes down on top of them, knocking themselves out in the process. Both these myths have been related to me as real events that have happened to “a friend of a friend”, one of which I then repeated to someone else only to have it pointed out as an urban myth and then have it told back to me as a true story some years later by another friend<sup>47</sup>. These myths speak to a deep fear of being discovered in the act of defecation, or to be found out by traces one leaves behind, particularly by someone with more power (in both the urban myths told to me, as well as in this particular scene, the discomfort of exposure is that it is to the parents of a friend/girlfriend, rather than one’s peers). The inequality between the exposed and the observer recalls Elias’ comments that in early modern times when defecation started to become less public shame was only attached to being seen by a superior, not an inferior (Elias 1994: 113). It was not uncommon for nobles to receive their inferiors while they were in the act of defecation, and until the seventeenth century the Groom of the Stool was a high office in the English court which publicly acknowledged the groom’s intimacy with the king (Greenblatt 1982: 9). In line with Elias’ argument that social changes are reflected in how children constitute their idea of appropriate behaviour, and following Klein’s development of Freud’s work in relation to excrement as a weapon that the child can use in fantasy against its mother (Klein 1991: 96), the climax of the scene is the struggle between Davie and his girlfriend’s mother over control of the sheet, which results in the besmirching of the whole family. The drama is intensified because it is his girlfriend’s parents that he is exposed to, rather than to his peers.

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<sup>47</sup> These stories are still being retold. The morning television presenters Richard and Judy told a version of one of these stories, as having happened to a friend of theirs, on the late night chat show *So Graham Norton* on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2001. In Richard and Judy’s version, the incident took place at an exclusive society wedding when their friend, unable to flush away her faeces, flung it out of the

Bakhtin calls “besmirching”, by which he means debasing with excrement and urine, “a very ancient gesture” from which our modern euphemism “mudslinging” is derived (Bakhtin 1984: 147-148). He cites examples from ancient literature such as Aeschylus’ play *The collector of bones* in which a chamber pot is thrown at the head of Odysseus, and Bourke also recounts several descriptions of the Feast of Fools in Europe, in which a central theme was that “the clowns after leaving the church, took their stand in dung-carts and threw ordure upon the by-standers.” (1891:12). The throwing of custard pies by clowns and the common trope of food fights in slap stick British and American film (particularly in the silent movie era and the films of Laurel and Hardy, and in later films such as *Smashing Time* (dir. Desmond Davis 1967), *Please Sir* (dir. Mark Stuart 1971), and *Bugsy Malone* (dir. Alan Parker 1976)) probably derives from this, and also suggests a link to the other theme in this episode, the merging of food and excrement. Replacing dung with food (custard pies, food fights, the *boudin* sausages mentioned by Bourke at the Feast of Fools) is another example of sublimation, an inversion of the high/low image. However, in this besmirching scene, as in the third scatological scene in *Trainspotting* (which was not included in the film), this is not an inversion but a merging, excrement as food. As the contents of Davie’s sheet splatters across the breakfast table, it is described as resembling “watery chip shop sauce” which mingles with the cooked breakfast. This is taken much further in the third scene where Renton’s girlfriend Kelly, working as a waitress in a restaurant, mixes various of her bodily products, including excrement, with food served to some customers who have insulted her (1994: 301-305). In this episode, excrement becomes poison (cf. Klein 1991) used by a weaker person against a stronger. Kelly is depicted as subordinate to the customers as a woman, as a Scottish person and as a waiter. She cannot outwardly harm the customers for fear of losing her job, but recalls her boyfriend’s comment that, in spite of the customer always being right, “waiters have power; never mess wi a waiter”, and uses that power to secretly harm them (although it is not a real power as she is dependent on the job for her future at university).

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window where it landed on the roof of the glass conservatory where the wedding reception was taking place. After telling this story, Richard added “It’s perfectly true”.

Welsh's use of excremental imagery is powerful and disgusting, one reviewer described *Filth* as "one of the most repellent novels I have ever read" (Shilling 1998) and, in support of Bakhtin's comments, they do not show any of the exuberant regeneration of Rabelais. Excrement is used to disgust and degrade the characters and to shock and amuse the reader and audience by juxtaposing images of the low with the high (Edinburgh Festival, a family Sunday breakfast, a meal in a restaurant). Welsh's novels present excrement in all its lowness, dragging everything down with it.

### Excrement as the deepest truth

However, there is another theme that I mentioned earlier but did not explore which pervades *Filth*; the idea of excrement as truth represented by the tapeworm in Robertson's guts. Although in Welsh this remains destructive – the truth is never revealed and is destroyed when Robertson kills himself – the image is a challenge to the dominant high/low dichotomy in which excrement is always low. Here, the tapeworm, represented on the page in a way that resembles a colon or a turd, tells the truth about Robertson and also falls in love with another tapeworm, experiencing a higher emotion than any that Robertson displays. This is not, however, an image of excrement as an inversion of the high, but as deep in itself. This is another set of images that interplays with the high/low axis; a horizontal plane – not the one mentioned by Bakhtin which moves forward in time and place but a plane that goes from deep to shallow, from the heart of the matter to the surface.

In this set of images value is placed on what is deep and hidden as it is believed to be more real or more truthful in the sense of expressing true identity. What is at the surface is not necessarily merely shallow and superficial but it is seen as less enduring, and as concealing something more real beneath it. Implicit in these images is that it takes effort to get to the bottom or deepest part. These themes are seen in psychoanalytic theory, in which the unconscious is the true motivator of action, not the conscious mind which is visible and at the surface. We also saw it at work in the idea of autointoxication and the impacted colon of which the surface body may make no sign but is really there underneath. Foucault noted this theme emerging in the idea of confession as uncovering not just what the subject hides from others but what is even unknown to himself, the real truth (1981: 66). It is also central to sociological

theory, such as Marxist notions of base and superstructure, and in the anthropological theory of Victor Turner who repeatedly uses images of depth and layers. Turner's argument is that "deep structure may be revealed through surface anti-structure" (1975: 34) and he talks of "fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse" and "deeply entrenched moral imperatives" (1975: 35). He wants to penetrate science-fiction like into peoples' minds to find what lies between "the full brightness of conscious attention and the darker strata of the unconscious" (1975: 36).

The suggestion is always there that the surface conceals the core and that what is underneath (at "the heart of the matter") is more real. In order to get to the truth one has to delve down (or deep) rather than look upwards. For Bakhtin, the grotesque image of the body is "composed of fertile depths and procreative convexities" and is "never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it" (1984: 339). In Rabelais, as in other early modern literature such as Spencer's *Farie Queen*, people can descend into the body just as they do into the bowels of the earth. And it is in the earth that the greatest riches are found. In Rabelais, the priestess of the Holy Bottle says that "the wonders earth, sea, and river offer you are not to be compared to what is hidden in the womb of the earth" (quoted in Bakhtin 1984: 368). Everything of value is to be found hidden in the body of the earth or in the depths of the body. Brown (1985), following Freud closely, argues that "all values are bodily values" because all life is of the body (1985: 293). Because of this, money is not a sublimation of excrement in the sense of an inversion of something high for something low. Money is recognised in the unconscious as excrement, not just a representation of it. It is because money is excrement (of the body) that it has any value at all.

Stallybrass and White hint at the idea of excrement and truth, but try to explain it in terms of the high/low dichotomy. They argue that the bourgeoisie, in defining the low as other, denied the grotesque reality of their bodies and repressed this aspect of themselves in the unconscious. This, however, is a truth about themselves that reappears in their fascination for the low other, which they have categorised in their conscious minds as "not me", but which is recognised by their unconscious as "me".

However, this still sees excrement as low, the dirty truth that the high tries to deny. What I am suggesting is that excrement is also seen as good and honest.

The idea of truth being hidden inside is an old one and not a product of ideas about the unconscious. Schoenfeldt (1997) and Masten (1997) both show how the idea of truth in the viscera of the body was used in early modern literature, and Masten uses this to challenge Bersani's (1988) idea of the rectum as a grave. Bersani's essay on responses to the AIDS crisis asked "Is the rectum a grave?", and concluded that, through the act of anal intercourse, it is "the grave in which the masculine ideal ...of proud subjectivity is buried" (1988: 222). Considering the implications of Bersani's article for the early modern period, Masten finds similar evidence of the anus as a grave, the link between excrement and death through the kind of transcoding that Stallybrass and White wrote about where what is low in the body (excrement) is linked to what is low in other domains (death, burial in the ground, Hell). However, he also finds another rhetoric which is not structured on the vertical axis. He is led to this through an exploration of the words *fundament* and *fundamental* and their etymological links to *foundation* and *foundational*, words which were used at the time to refer to the buttocks and anus, as well as used in the modern sense of foundations of buildings (Masten 1997: 133). It appears to Masten that the anus as fundament was used in the sense of being the base, rather than a passive receptacle or the opposite of high: "while the fundament, as foundation and seat, may participate in the rhetoric of the low, this is lowliness with a positive valence" (1997: 134).

Masten also links the rhetoric of the fundament to the rhetoric of bodily knowledge – the pursuit of knowledge, probing and setting forth (1997: 137), echoed by Schoenfeldt in his exploration of "fables of the belly" who finds that proper attention to digestion and elimination was the way to knowledge of God in the early modern period. Knowledge and truth were to be found deep within the body. Schoenfeldt's discussion about the stomach leads him to find, like Masten, a similar alternative to the high/low hierarchy. Shakespeare's use of the fable of the belly in *Coriolanus* is an example of the use of "a hierarchy based on the distinction between center and periphery" which gives a higher priority to the role of the stomach than the head or the heart in the body's functioning (Schoenfeldt 1997: 248). The early modern stomach, he argues, "was a primal site for the exercise of ethical discrimination and

moral virtue” (Schoenfeldt 1997: 257) and the internal body was of more importance than the surface.

Another example of the ambiguity of whether excrement is low or deep in early modern thought is given by Greenblatt in his comparison of the use of scatological imagery by More and Luther during the sixteenth century. For More, defecation is a form of pleasure, the lowest form in his hierarchy of pleasures, but a pleasure none the less (Greenblatt 1982: 11). Although he uses scatology in his abuse, this is, according to Greenblatt, from a communal rather than a personal position, a reminder of the collective body in the Rabelaisian perspective from which the Catholic More is not far removed. We may recall that More’s epigram (see chapter four) stated that farting has the power of life as well as death (Harington 1962: 100). For Luther, excrement is associated with the Devil and his rule over the world, and just as the Devil attacks us with excrement so too must we retaliate personally with excrement. Greenblatt sees in this “a telling difference between the Catholic and Protestant semiotics of excrement”, in which for More defecation is “a necessity that God has rendered mildly, if embarrassingly, pleasurable” while for Luther it is “a mark of sinfulness and spiritual violence”. Scatology for More, writes Greenblatt, is part of an institutional rhetoric, a form of shared defence from the communal body, whereas for Luther it is a personal weapon in the struggle of man against the devil or “an expression of the inward state of the individual fleshly man” (1982: 12). This illustrates Mellor and Shilling’s (1997) arguments about the Protestant re-formation of the body which abstracted the experience of embodiment from its environment, from the communal and sensual engagement with the world, and made possible the personal and individual experience expressed in Luther’s excremental battle with the Devil. As Mellor and Shilling show, however, the Protestant project was always challenged by the baroque sensuality of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In a crude way, then, excrement as low seems to fit with the Protestant re-formation of embodiment which emphasised the mind and denigrated the body and its products, while excrement as deep expresses the baroque interest in sensuality and passion in which knowledge came from carnal experience.

## Excrement and the definition of difference

From the discussion so far, excrement appears in the Western imagination as a levelling substance, with the power to debase all that is high, to bring everything down to its own level, and to tell the truth about who we really are. “Even the queen shits”, or “imagine them with their pants down” are the type of statements made to stress how little power one person really has over another. The fact that everyone has to defecate makes everyone, in the end, equal. Attempts to dispute this equality are powerful statements; the “key to the executive washroom”, for example, a symbol of higher status in the work place. Visits by members of the English royal family are prepared for by advance visits of aides who inspect the toilet arrangements to ensure that equality is *not* allowed; a separate toilet for the exclusive use of royalty, and a new toilet seat that is removed after the visit<sup>48</sup>. At other times challenges to the equality of defecating are counter-challenged. At the 1999 Glastonbury music festival a public row broke out between two socialist performers over the toilets. The singer Billy Bragg announced to the festival audience that the group Manic Street Preachers had brought their own personal toilet with a hand-written notice on the door saying “These facilities are reserved exclusively for the Manic Street Preachers”. Bragg later said:

Having to use the festival 'facilities' is an essential part of the Glastonbury experience. Everyone from Michael Stipe [of REM] on down has to use the Portaloo and legend has it that Farmer Eavis [who runs the festival] makes an egalitarian point of ensuring that the backstage toilets are the last call on the daily emptying round. Frankly, if you haven't sat on the old thundermug at Glastonbury, you haven't really been to the festival. (Gibbons 1999)

However, experiences of defecating are also used to define differences, particularly between men and women. As Paster writes, “scatology, and any other kind of somatic discourse, [has] a signifying potential in the strategies of gender and class differentiation – the strategies by which a particular body’s physical attributes, functions, and behaviors participate in and reproduce conventional social meanings”

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<sup>48</sup> From personal communication from Frankenberg concerning Princess Margaret’s visits to Oxford University, and from de Salis concerning the Duchess of Kent’s visit to the bird sanctuary island of Aride in the Seychelles

(Paster 1993: 144). As mentioned in chapter three, there are very clear gender distinctions involved in excreting in Britain in public toilets with one of the fundamental segregations of boys and girls at schools into the use of separate toilet facilities. The separation in space implies already that this shared human experience is different for men and women and, as briefly suggested in chapter three, this is linked to the association between excretion and sexuality, and the vulnerability of being exposed.

Modern British segregation in public toilets is unambiguous, a clear case of classification, and it was the ambiguity of a unisex toilet in France that caused Ian's discomfort. But while we may have brought order to one part of excretory experience, there is always an ambiguity when it comes to the gender of the person excreting: women are linked more closely with Elias' civilised and Bakhtin's closed bodies in the imaginations of both men and women, and *at the same time* are linked more closely with grotesque and leaky bodies and the unformed bodies of children. The maxim that "horses sweat, men perspire but ladies only glow" offers an ideal image of the closed and finished 'lady' in contrast to the more earthy man, and the beastly horse. But this sits side by side with the total opposite where women, particularly in their capacity to reproduce, menstruate and lactate (which means they have more orifices and products to emit from their bodies) and in their gendered role of cleaning up after other bodies, seem to exemplify the grotesque body in comparison to the closed male body. These contrasting beliefs illustrate the ambiguity about gender and bodily processes.

In 1974 Ortner proposed that women are universally more closely linked to nature than are men. Women are seen as less transformative of culture than men are and she related this to women's biological functions. Women are everywhere, she argued, responsible for starting the process of transformation of children into cultural persons but at some point this process is taken over (for boys in particular) by men. With this theory Ortner explained why women are universally subordinated to men, with women's bodily functions playing a crucial role. Because women menstruate, give birth and lactate, they are closely associated with bodily fluids and impurity. In their role as mothers and carers of children they are also closely associated with the bodily products of children. In the same collection of papers, Rosaldo (1974) suggested that



the universal subordination of women is related to their association with the domestic sphere of activity (involving cleaning up waste products, preparation of food and monitoring the health and regular functioning of the family) as opposed to men who are associated with the public sphere, and, like Ortner, she links this to women's reproductive role.

Both these theories have been criticised by feminists and anthropologists and their ideas are no longer much used in anthropology (for an overview of these criticisms see Moore 1988: 13-24) but since one of the criticisms has been that these are ethnocentric theories based on a specific historical and cultural view of what constitutes not only men and women but also nature, culture, public and private, it is useful to reconsider them when looking at the specific historical and cultural context in which they were defined. Moore points out that "the concept of the superiority of culture over nature is a Western one, and is part of the conceptual apparatus of a society which sees civilization as the culmination of 'man's' triumph over nature" (1988: 20). Similarly, the idea of women as confined to the domestic role and men to the public is shown by Moore to be historically specific to nineteenth century Western society (1988: 22). The Western idea of nature as messy and uncontrolled can be seen to fit more closely one Western image of women as similarly messy and uncontrolled with their (potentially) leaky bladders, vaginas and breasts, and cleaning up after messy and uncontrolled infants (Lawton 2000: 142-143). Paster (1993) explores this in early modern literature, noting that bodily products including urine, faeces, blood and milk were all used in gender specific ways by writers such as Shakespeare and Jonson to show women as subordinate to men and requiring men's control. References to urinary function in early modern drama as well as medical treatises and proverbs of the time, all constructed the female body as "effluent, overproductive, out of control", not just in terms of their bodily fluids, but also in terms of their speech (Paster 1993: 21). Several writers have suggested that the association of women with bodily products is in part related to the confusion between the anus and the vagina (Shapiro 1989, Freud 1977). St Augustine wrote that we are born between urine and faeces in order to show the humility of mankind, but this firmly links vagina with anus.

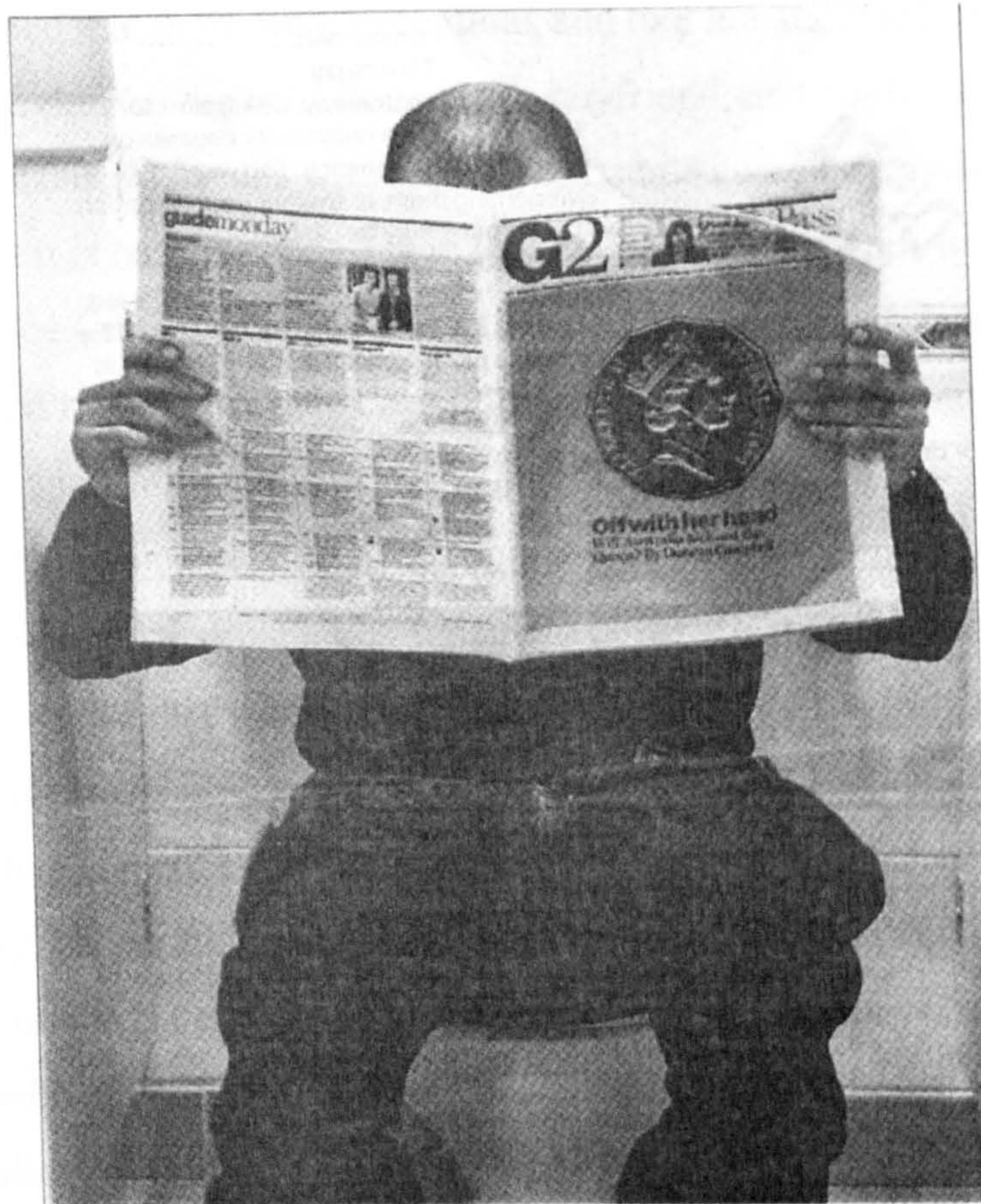
At the same time as this view of women as more leaky, excretion is also understood in the modern British popular imagination to be something more associated with men than women. While women may be more likely to be involved in cleaning up the excrement of people they care for, men in modern Britain are more likely than women to work in dirty environments such as in sewers or slaughter houses, or to work as dustmen or road sweepers. Certainly from A. Martin's book on privies it always seems to have been the man's job to empty the bucket.

A recent Guardian article entitled "Secrets of the Smallest Room" opened with the line: "If you're reading this on the loo, you're probably a man" (Crawford 1999). The article is accompanied by a photograph of a man reading while sitting on the toilet. Another Guardian article written four months later which only incidentally mentions the subject is also accompanied by a cartoon of a man sitting on the toilet (Holt 2000) – it is rare to see a picture of a woman similarly posed (see figure 1 overleaf)<sup>49</sup>. In her article Crawford admits that there is no evidence, except anecdotal, for her statement that the reader will be male if reading her article on the toilet, but she can be fairly confident that her readers will recognise a truism even if their own experience does not fit<sup>50</sup>. I was sitting in a pub one evening with some friends when, following on from a conversation about football, Sharon stated that men spend longer on the toilet when having a shit, and always take a book or newspaper to read (her train of thought equated interest in football with a male tendency to make lists and, via a rudimentary knowledge of Freudian psychology, to anal obsession). A male friend responded that he does neither of these things, and Sharon's boyfriend said that his father *and* mother both took books and cups of tea into the toilet with them. Despite these personal experiences that contradicted her,

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<sup>49</sup> Although, having said that, I have noticed two adverts on British television in the last few weeks that link women with defecation: one for a laxative against constipation, and one for an anti-diarrhoeal preparation. In both, the women are shown taking control of their unruly bowels and are shown as active and in relationships with other people rather than in the act of defecating.

<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Longhurst (2001) found in her focus groups with New Zealand men about their use of the bathroom that there was a reluctance to linger in the bathroom and most of the men in her groups said they spent as little time as possible in the toilet. One reason, she suggests, is that in New Zealand there is an anti-intellectual culture, and reading is seen as a feminine activity (2001: 78).



*Figure 1*

**Illustrations from articles in *The Guardian***

**Top:** From Crawford, E. "Secrets of the smallest room" 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1999

**Bottom:** From Holt, J. "An eponym by any other name..." 18<sup>th</sup> March 2000

Sharon maintained that these were exceptions and that her statement reflected the truth, giving as evidence the behaviour of her boyfriend, and confirmation of her ideas from other female friends with whom she had discussed the issue. It made more sense to her that it is because he is a man that her boyfriend spends longer in the toilet than she does, rather than because of his parents' behaviour. It is a belief that I have heard stated by other women during the course of this study, but never by a man. However, apart from in the example mentioned above, when the belief about male toilet habits has been made in the company of men it seems to be accepted by them, often with a guilty smile and a statement of justification, and sometimes by an expression of surprise that women don't do the same thing. Bryson (1996) momentarily breaks off from the tales of his travels around England to ponder some differences between men and women, concluding his ruminations with the rhetorical question, "Why, above all, do they find it so unsettling if you spend more than four minutes a day on the toilet?" (1996: 136). He relates an imaginary but typical conversation with his wife in which she berates him for spending three-quarters of an hour "just reading".

Consider the "perfect day" scenarios in the box below which were being circulated on the internet during 1999. It doesn't matter that these descriptions may not fit an individual's idea of a perfect day. What is important is that these stereotypes are recognisable. Sensual pleasure is central to both stories. For the woman the pleasures are of the perfect and communicative body: most of her day (apart from the shower) are spent with other people, often being physically touched (massage, making love). Her meals are described in terms of communication rather than eating. Appearance is emphasised, both for herself and in comparison with other people. Her body is a way for her to communicate with the world through its outward appearance and inner health. In contrast, the man's pleasure focuses on the frontiers of the body. His pleasure is in taking things in and out of the body: eating and drinking, ejaculating, excreting and farting. He is not communicating with anyone, the only people mentioned are various anonymous women whose purpose is to help him to ejaculate. The status symbols of wealth – a limousine, a private jet and golf – are combined with working class symbols of burgers, beer, and tabloid newspapers. The woman's pleasures are all symbols of wealth; a gym, a restaurant, not working, having lunch with friends. It is the image of a cultivated woman contrasted with a down-to-earth

man who can afford a limousine and a private jet but prefers the “real-man’s food” of burgers, chips and beer.

<b><u>The Perfect Day for Her:</u></b>		<b><u>The Perfect Day for Him:</u></b>	
08:15	Wake up to hugs and kisses	06:00	Alarm
08:30	Weigh in 5lbs lighter than yesterday	06:15	Blow-job
08:45	Breakfast in bed, fresh squeezed orange juice and croissants	06:30	Massive dump while reading sports section of The Sun
09:15	Soothing hot bath with fragrant lilac bathoil	07:00	Breakfast, bacon, sausage and eggs, toast and coffee
10:00	Light work-out at club with handsome, funny personal trainer	07:15	Limo arrives
10:30	Facial, manicure, shampoo and blow dry	07:45	Bloody Mary enroute to airport
12:00	Lunch with best friend at outdoor café	08:15	Private Learjet to St Andrews, Scotland
12:45	Notice ex-boyfriend’s wife, she has gained 30lbs	09:30	Limo to St Andrews Golf Club
13:00	Shopping with friends, unlimited credit	11:45	Lunch, burger, chips, ketchup and several beers
15:00	Nap	12:15	Blow-job
16:00	Three dozen roses delivered by florist, card is from secret admirer	12:30	More golf
16:15	Light work-out at club, followed by gentle massage	14:15	Limo back to airport (more beer & enroute blow-job)
17:30	Pick out outfit for dinner, primp before the mirror	14:30	Private Learjet to Dublin (nap)
19:30	Candlelight dinner for two followed by dancing	15:30	Late afternoon Guinness drinking with all female (topless) crowd
22:00	Hot shower (alone)	17:00	Learjet back home, massage & hand-job enroute by naked girls
22:30	Make love	18:45	Shit, shower and shave
23:00	Pillow talk, light touching and cuddling	19:30	Dinner, even more beer, 20oz steak
23:15	Fall asleep in his big strong arms	21:00	Brandy and Cuban Partagas cigar
		21:30	Sex with three women
		23:00	Massage and Jacuzzi
		23:45	Bed (alone)
		23:50	12 second, 4 octave fart: dog leaves the room
		23:55	Giggle yourself to sleep

It is essential to the intended humour of these scenarios (and they are intended to be funny) that the woman’s perfect day precedes the man’s. His perfect day serves to degrade the woman’s image of refinement in a pure inversion of the high/low dichotomy. Her final three quarters of an hour spent making love, talking and falling asleep are inverted by his first three quarters of an hour spent ejaculating, shitting and eating. But the point is not just the contrast between the two scenes; the point is the relish with which the man experiences his excretory functions, the fact that in the end he is giggling himself to sleep at the thought of his fart.

Cheek (1997) considers the gendered response to excremental jokes in her review of Howard Jacobson’s study of humour:

I have often wondered what makes boys so interested in farting and other related ruderies. Puzzling for a girl. But now in *Seriously Funny ...* Howard Jacobson rends the veil about the primal relevance of faeces. We have suppressed the animal in us, we have become too correct, too fastidious. Farts and faeces are, he argues passionately, at the very root of our comedy and therefore our survival. ...Hmm. Perhaps I've seen too many nappies." (Cheek 1997).

Cheek's flippant comment (echoed later in her review when responding to Jacobson's enthusiasm about native American excremental ritual and his regret that modern clowns have replaced the faeces with flour and water: "Who, I ask mildly, would clean up afterwards...?") suggests that it is women's historical roles as mothers that has rendered them inured to excrement as an object of interest, a suggestion that in fact fits in with the "woman as nature, man as culture" argument. It is not that women are either more or less associated with excrement than men, but that they have a different relationship with it through their experience as mothers and housekeepers and as menstruating women. Stallybrass & White's argument that "low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination." (1986:191) would suggest that if men are more closely identified with culture, as further away from nature than women are, then they could be expected to be more fascinated with excrement than are women. The problem with this argument, of course, is that it essentialises a difference between men and women, and a difference between nature and culture. Even while recognising a stereotype, plenty of men and women would not recognise themselves in either of the two internet jokes.

However, it could be that there is a difference in the embodied experience of excretion for men and women in British (and Euro-American) culture. For one thing, women sit down to urinate as well as to defecate so the preparation is the same for both activities and carried out several times during the day, while for men they are quite different activities and, in public toilets, usually carried out in different environments. This has been suggested to me by one woman as a reason why she does not associate defecating with taking any longer than urinating, in contrast to her husband who said that he would avoid going for a shit at someone else's house as the length of his absence would be noticed by others (and his activity thereby exposed).

Spinrad (1994) carried out a survey about bodily products among 66 men and 40 women (by questionnaire to friends, students at Berkley and posted on two internet sites). Although by no means a robust study, it suggests interesting areas of difference in experience between men and women as well as differences in gendered notions and representations. Spinrad's first question is about the size of the stool, reminiscent of another Freudianism that has become part of popular culture – the idea that men are concerned about their penis size. The whole idea of Spinrad as a man conducting this survey in the first place, and then choosing this as the first question (“Ever pinch a loaf so big that it stuck out of the water?”) fits in with the notion of men being more interested in faecal matters than women; his results state that “most men surveyed say they have done this; most women say they have not” (1994: 11)<sup>51</sup>. In a question about regularity, Spinrad found a range from once every two to three days to five times a day, with all those claiming to defecate four or more times a day being male (1994: 14). In conversations during the course of my research four men have described their bowel regularity as being several times a day, and a large amount each time, while no women have reported the same experience. In the rest of his questions about excrement (about techniques of wiping, relationship with food consumed and use of unfamiliar toilets) there is little gender difference in responses, but he found the widest gender gap of the whole survey in response to a question on flatus (“About how many times per day do you usually fart?” (1994: 29)), where women said they averaged 3.28 times per day and men 13.63 times – clearly these figures are not conclusive but they suggest, again, the idea of men as more linked to excrement than women, and of men perceiving themselves as farting more than women (or women perceiving themselves as farting less than men)<sup>52</sup>. In Spinrad's questions about other bodily products – urine, vomit and nasal mucus – there was very little difference in the responses between men and women. The point of talking about Spinrad's book (published as one of the Re-search series that focuses

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<sup>51</sup> This also supports Longhurst (2001: 75-76) who found from her focus groups with New Zealand men about defecation that the men were more comfortable talking about solid matter (faeces) than they were about fluid matter (particularly sperm).

<sup>52</sup> A recent advert on British television shows a woman in a board meeting suffering from wind, with the voice over stating that men and women fart exactly the same amount in a day.

on marginal and fringe culture) is that it is both illustrative of the representation, and suggestive of the experience, of gendered differences in defecating.

As well as the idea of excretion as gendered, there is also an idea of it as being class specific. We saw this in the perfect-day scenarios above where the man was depicted as enjoying the pleasures associated with the working class while also making use of middle/upper class status symbols. Paster (1993) shows that images of excrement in the sixteenth century drama were also used to define the class position of the characters. In *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, she argues, excrement is used to naturalise subordinate class position through the depiction of Hodge as shamefully open and hence not governed by rational will (1993: 127). Malinowski, in praising the Trobriand islanders for their horror of farting in public, wrote that a crowd in Melanesia "is considerably more pleasant in this respect than a gathering of European peasants" (1932: 377), associating the smell of excrement and the lack of control over bodily exudations firmly with the lower classes, and showing what Stallybrass and White refer to as the transcoding of what is low in the social hierarchy onto the lowest aspects of the body. At the same time as excrement being associated with low social status in a negative sense, however, there is also the idea of excrement as honest and true. Reed-Danahay analyses the ritual of *la rôtie* in the Auvergne region of France partly in terms of the relationship between the rural farming community and the bourgeoisie. Amongst other things, she argues that the ritual expresses a criticism of bourgeois taste and sensibilities (1996: 756).

What the arguments of Stallybrass and White, and of Reed-Danahay show, however, is that while excrement as low may be associated with the low of the social scale, the opposite is not true: cleanliness and hygiene are associated with the middle classes, not the upper classes. A friend told me a crude (and rather offensive) definition of social class: a working class man will piss directly into the water because he doesn't know any better, an upper class man will piss directly into the water because he doesn't care, while a middle class man will piss against the side of the bowl so as not to make any noise. As reported in Elias (1994: 113), in early modern court society defecation in front of inferiors was not considered offensive, and royalty could be attended by servants during the process, quoting Della Casa from the sixteenth century: "It is true that a great lord might do so before one of his servants or in the



presence of a friend of lower rank; for in this he would not show him arrogance but rather a particular affection and friendship.”

Marc told me that one day he was at a bus stop when a man standing nearby (who he described as scruffy and dirty) let out a loud fart. Marc looked at him with disgust,

### The humour of excrement

Throughout this chapter I have referred to situations in which defecation and excrement are considered funny. Bakhtin referred to excrement as “gay matter” which transforms fear into laughter (1984: 335), and the besmirching scene in *Trainspotting* was considered very funny by the group of (male) friends with whom I watched it. Gerald Scarfe depicted “British comedy” in the Millenium Dome with a sculpture of a toilet (adorned with large teeth and breasts) indicating the importance of scatology to humour in Britain (figure 2). However, while excrement and defecation may be considered a source of humour, there is an ambivalent relationship between the tragic and the comic.

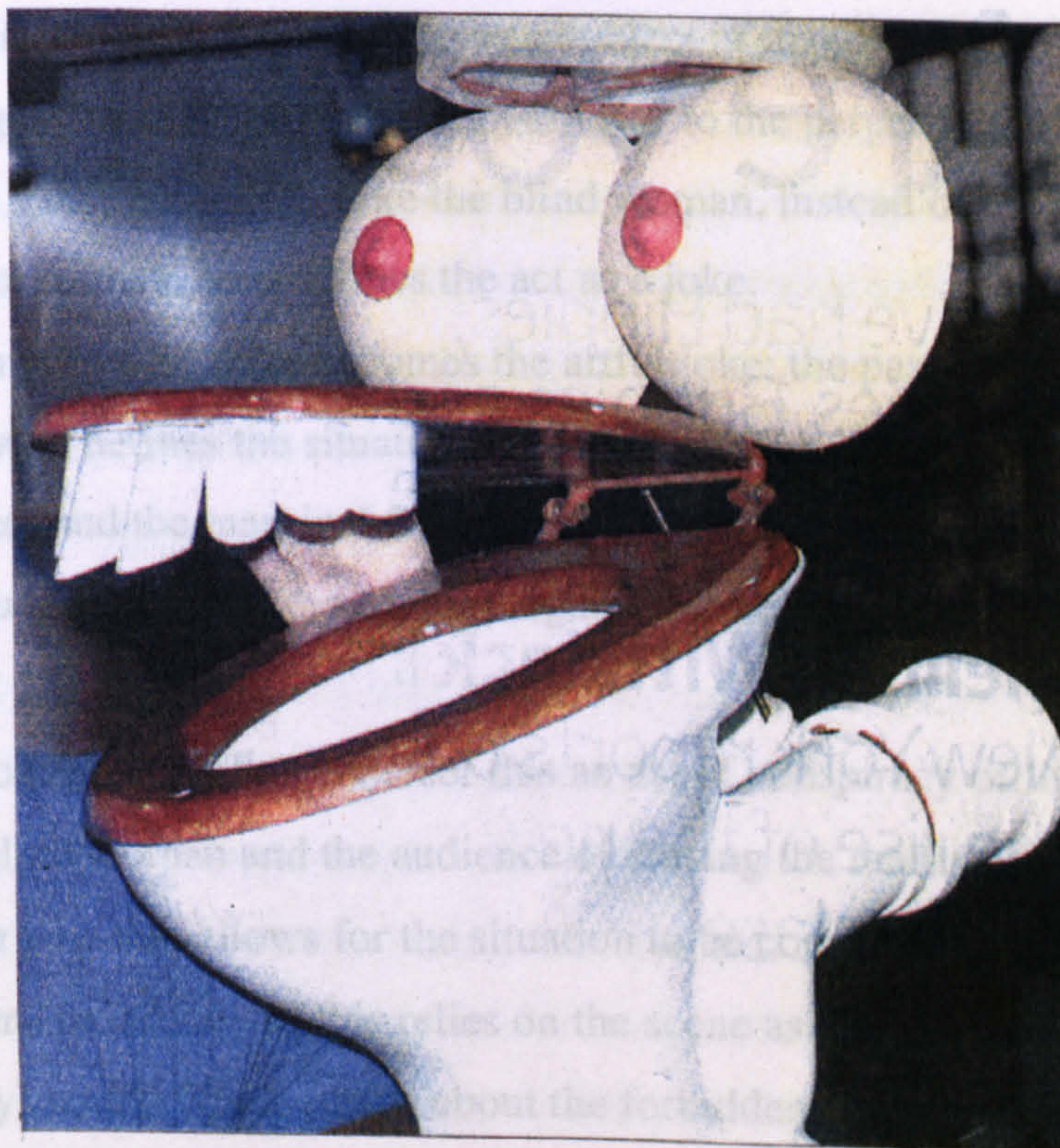


Figure 2

**Gerald Scarfe's piece "British Comedy" from the Millenium Dome**

(from *The Observer* 28<sup>th</sup> May 2000)

Marc told me that one day he was at a bus stop when a man standing nearby (who he described as scruffy and dirty) let out a loud fart. Marc looked at him with disgust, but then he turned to Marc and said “that’s what I thought of lunch”. Marc found this very funny, and his disgust turned instantly to amusement, as his opinion of the man turned from revulsion at his bodily act to respect at his self-recovery. The man, who had seemed out of control because he farted loudly, took control of the situation by making a joke against the lunch he had eaten. This is an act of *selfwork* (Stronach and Allan 1999) by which the man’s failed performance (farting loudly in public being a failure of the presentation of self as controlled) is translated from negative to positive, “reclaiming the event for farce rather than tragedy, and rescuing [himself] from humiliation by ...attracting the laughter of others” (Stronach and Allan 1999: 34). Like Stronach and Allan’s example of a blind woman in a restaurant, who mistakenly poured the water from the flower vase onto her chips instead of vinegar, the man’s response to his mistake solves a problem both for himself and the audience. His initial failure marks him as an object of disgust, but by becoming a joker he changes “from that of the victim of error to the perpetrator of a joke.” (Stronach and Allan 1999: 35). Like the blind woman, instead of the act defining him as disgusting or foolish, he redefines the act as a joke.

The unwitting mistake becomes the artful joke; the passive victim the active agent who defines the situation for others, manipulating how they will respond; and the marginal figure becomes central and powerful in defining the situation. In this way ... [he] regains control, and is applauded for it. (1999: 35)

However, Stronach and Allan consider this an act of conspiracy of ‘normality’ between the blind woman and the audience of erasing the reality of disability, framing it in a way that allows for the situation to be considered comic instead of tragic. The very possibility of this relies on the scene as already implicitly (albeit in a forbidden way) comic. Their stance about the forbidden element of humour in the tragic (laughing at disability) is challenged by T. Shakespeare, who argues that a disabled person laughing at his or her own failure is not necessarily giving the non-disabled audience permission to laugh, but absolving them from the “weight of empathy which they feel obligated to carry”: “By laughing at ourselves, we establish

a rapport which enables communication to overcome stigma” (T. Shakespeare 1999: 50).

What these explanations suggest is that laughter is about communication and moral choice. I came across a friend of mine reading an early draft of chapter three of this thesis, laughing at some of the quotes and stories; it is unlikely that anyone would laugh at the quotes and stories in Lawton’s (2000) or Seymour’s (1998) studies of sickness and disablement even though they too concern peoples’ anxieties about defecation. The difference is that the predicaments in which people with disabilities or cancer find themselves, as described by Lawton and Seymour, move the reader to compassion, sympathy or pity and this precludes laughter. In Stronach and Allan’s example, the audience, knowing she was blind, were only able to laugh when she laughed, indicating that no harm had been done.

The issue of empathy is crucial to Joubert’s theory of laughter in his *Treatise on Laughter*, first published in 1579. Joubert argues that laughter comes from a mixture of sorrow and joy and the things that make one laugh are when a person accidentally does something that is tragic but inconsequential. So, for example, someone falling over is funny if they do not hurt themselves, but tragic if they do. Joubert’s explanation of laughter, although based on a humoral body rather than a psychological one and therefore employing unfamiliar relationships between bodily organs, is useful to understand why shit can be funny in some circumstances and tragic in others. Laughter, he explains, is composed of contrary movements derived from joy and sorrow, because “all laughable matter comes from ugliness and impropriety” (Joubert 1980: 44). Joy makes the heart expand and increase the flow of humours, while sorrow (at the sight of the unseemly) makes it shrink and restrict humoral loss and this contrary motion causes laughter. In Joubert’s explanation the brain perceives the event but it is the movement of the heart in response to what the brain has perceived that makes the emotion known and understood, so it is in the act of laughing that something is known to be funny. Joubert writes that

It is equally unfitting to show one’s arse, and when there is no harm forcing us to sympathize, we are unable to contain our laughter. But if another suddenly puts a red-hot iron to him, laughter gives way to compassion unless the harm done seems light, and small, for that reinforces the laughter, seeing

that he is properly punished for his foolishness and unpleasant foul deed.

(Joubert 1980: 20)

This explanation suggests that laughter is an appropriate, natural and moral response to the sight of the ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting and indecorous (provided we are not moved to compassion). What seems very different in Joubert's explanation from how humour is experienced today is that it seems to suggest that humour is inherent in a situation rather than in the reaction of the observer. While there is a moral element (for example, Joubert says that we will laugh more at a "great and important personage" falling in the quagmire than at a child), laughter is not described as being within the observer's control; the body responds by laughing to an internal physical reaction to fear and joy. In modern Britain, while we may laugh at the same events, this is seen as a moral choice which may be "in bad taste", with an implication that we choose to find something funny.

Alison told me a story which shows a tragic situation becoming comic. She and a group of friends had been out together one night and had all stayed over at Alison's house. One girl had woken up in the morning with a hangover, had a cup of coffee and a cigarette and then set off to drive to work. On her way to work, the effect of the coffee and cigarette along with her hangover meant that she was overcome with a need to defecate and soiled herself in her car. She turned around and drove back to Alison's house, and met Alison walking along the street. She indicated what had happened, while trying to hide the smell and sight of herself by at first keeping the car window closed and then telling Alison not to look as she managed to get back into the house and change. Later that evening, the girl returned to Alison's house and recounted what had happened to everyone else in the shared house as a humorous story. What had been a painfully embarrassing and distressing experience became something funny to make other people laugh. When Alison told me this event, she expressed surprise that the girl had chosen to return to the house and tell people what had happened. In Alison's story her sympathy towards her friend's predicament meant that she did not find it funny at the time, and neither did her friend although once the girl had regained her composure she then turned the situation into a funny anecdote because no harm had been sustained.

The comic and the tragic are linked through the act of defecation itself. Early modern theories of laughter suggested that the physical act of laughing itself could produce involuntary release of the bowel. Joubert (1980) has a chapter in his treatise on laughter on “whence it comes that one pisses, shits, and sweats by dint of laughing”, in which he describes how the contents of the bowel sometimes “escapes us indecorously” when we laugh. At the same time, catharsis is the effect of tragic drama, the release of emotion which, as I have shown above, is experientially not so far away from the release of physical matter. Catharsis can refer equally to an emotional release or a physical one and originally, humour referred to a physical substance in the body which could be discharged through purging. Although the word has now lost almost all association with physical matter (except as a watery substance in the eye), this suggests a vestigial connection between humour and the release of matter.

In an episode of the popular British television comedy, *The Royle Family*, the precarious link between the comedy and tragedy of excreting is shown. The entire action takes place in the sitting room of the house with the family sitting around in front of the television. Half way through this particular episode, the grandmother enters the room having come down from upstairs, and joins the family on the sofa. From her comments to her daughter it is clear that she has been in the bathroom trying to defecate. Her comments about her constipation are greeted by looks of disgust from her son-in-law, although he also comments that he has been waiting to use the bathroom too. Later, laughing along with other members of the family at some incident, the grandmother lets out a loud fart. She is embarrassed and stops laughing, and a few seconds later informs her daughter that she is going back upstairs to “try again”; as soon as she leaves the room the rest of the family burst out laughing. What is interesting about this episode in a very popular British comedy programme is how defecation is used to create laughter. The grandmother entering the room and talking to her daughter about her constipation is not considered funny by the other family members, but is ignored (apart from the son-in-law who shows his discomfort with the conversation), although the audience watching the programme will be amused by the situation. The unexpected entrance of the grandmother late on in this particular episode, and the realisation that she has been upstairs on the toilet during the episode amuses by its surprise; as Tom Shakespeare

wrote “reversal of expectation is always richly comedic” (1999: 51). The revelation of her very embodied absence (that she had been in the house all along taking part in the most bodily of activities) is shocking to us, but not to the family in the scene who experienced her as a disembodied presence (they knew she was in the house, and may well have known where she was). Her involuntary fart, however, is experienced as amusing for the family, although they cannot express this until she has left the room because of her obvious distress. The grandmother is revealed as out of control of her body in not being able to release or to contain her body products, and is the object of mirth because of it. In another episode, the son-in-law looks on with disgust while his own son-in-law changes his grandson’s nappy in front of him, but then laughs uproariously when the baby farts, saying with glee that the baby takes after himself.

In this chapter I have considered various ways in which excrement is and has been considered in the British imagination. The point of this is to show the ambivalence of shit; that it is not just considered low and disgusting but has intrinsic value.

However, these ideas inform the performance of the act, allowing us to know how to respond to situations.

## Chapter 6 – Controlling Performance and Performing Control

*'Cogito ergo sum,'* he read. *'But why not caco ergo sum?'*

Aldous Huxley (1955: 92)

In this final chapter I want to draw together the themes running through this thesis by going back to the theories of embodiment and performance outlined at the beginning. I argued in the introduction and chapter two that defecation has been ignored in anthropology, or mentioned only in passing in relation to child development or symbolism. It has not received the same level of attention as other comparable activities such as menstruation, eating and food production, or death and dying, despite the fact that all persons defecate throughout their lives. It could be argued that the level of attention that anthropologists have paid to the subject is in relation to the apparent level of attention that was paid to it by the members of the societies where they studied. Even if this were the case (that it was too insignificant for the inhabitants for anthropologists to take any notice) the fact that defecation is not insignificant in the modern West suggests that (for Western anthropologists at least) some effort may have been exerted to exclude this from fieldwork<sup>53</sup>. However, I suggest that defecation is never insignificant as a social act because it is a repetitive bodily action that is subject to particular arrangements in all societies.

Defecation, as I have shown in this thesis, is not just an issue for children and their parents, or a symbol for some other, more sociological, range of experiences, but an immediate, felt need that demands meaningful action, and a cultural performance that is both instrumental and expressive (Frankenberg 1986). By focusing on the embodied experience of shitting in one particular society, I have explored the ways in which this activity is performed on a day to day basis. This has shown that the

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<sup>53</sup> Many people in modern Britain find “toilets abroad” a stressful subject that can spoil a holiday, or at least become a topic worthy of note and anecdote, and while British anthropologists spend longer in their chosen sites of fieldwork than tourists or travellers (so may become inured to the facilities or sight of other people defecating) they are likely to experience similar initial concerns.

experiences and meanings of privacy, release and ambiguity constitute and are in part constituted by the modern British experience of excreting. The immediate bodily experience may be a sense of pressure and discomfort and a need to expel, but we are never pre-cultural so always this is experienced within a specific contingent situation. In Britain today, this means that a desire to excrete is also felt as a need to find an appropriate place which is out of sight of other people, and may also be felt as a cause of embarrassment and/or an anticipation of pleasure accompanied with a sensation that the body is working well.

There is an inherent contradiction in the modern British experience of defecation, then, that needs to be managed daily. On the one hand, it is embarrassing and to be avoided as a source of discomfort, on the other hand it is desirable and to be welcomed as a source of comfort. This paradox is part of the modern British performance of defecation, and can be considered as a paradox of control. A person's sense of control over his or her bowels (whether they can hide or suppress the noises and smells, as well as the products themselves; whether they can let their products out or keep them in at will; and whether their act or excrement is used symbolically against or for them) is paramount to whether the felt needs are met and whether the experience is one of pleasure or of discomfort.

### **Defecation as cultural performance**

In chapter two I explained why I was approaching defecation as an embodied process that is constituted as a social, natural and expressive activity through repetitive performance in daily life. In chapters three to five I showed how the process is performed in modern Britain, where people are born into a world where their excrement is disposed of without much effort on their part, where they learn to excrete in private, where men and women are segregated, where they know that they have to defecate regularly or risk discomfort or even illness, where poo is funny in some circumstances and embarrassing in others, and where excrement both unites and divides people. The place of shit in people's lives is reconstituted anew on a daily basis through intimate and not so intimate relationships with other people, and through the presence and use of scatological imagery.



Although, as I argued in the introduction, little has been written on the subject in the anthropological literature, from the few passing references or short articles that have appeared over the years it is clear that defecation is performed in particular cultural ways in different parts of the world and at different times. In most parts of contemporary Euro-American cultures, people sit down to defecate on a toilet as if on a chair, while in most of the rest of the world people squat down (the particular bodily posture taken is a function of the technological apparatus available which in turn has been developed according to what is the habitual practice). In the West paper is used for cleaning after defecating, water is used in many other parts of the world, and shells or stones in others. Newman (1997: 6) reports that in India she was instructed to wash herself by placing her hand behind her left leg, while in Southeast Asia she was told to place her hand around the front of her leg. As discussed in chapter three, it is considered usual to defecate alone in modern Britain although there are occasions when this does not apply, while Malinowski claims that the Trobriand islanders would *never* go to defecate together, or defecate near each other (Malinowski: 1932: 375, except when at sea when other men may hold a companion over the edge of the boat), and, at the other extreme, van der Geest (1998) records that the Akan of Ghana preferred to go in company to the areas of bush reserved for excretion, and later made use of the few communal latrines available. The Trobriand Islanders' reluctance to defecate near each other is linked to their disgust at unpleasant smells that is so pronounced that, according to Malinowski, farting in the presence of other people is considered very dishonouring and shameful, "even in a crowd where it can be committed anonymously such a breach of etiquette never happens in Melanesia" (1932: 377). In contrast, Fortes wrote that the Tallensi are not bothered by the stench around their homestead because excreta – human and animal – are regarded as essential fertiliser and therefore valued (1945: 8). Withholding farts, on the other hand, was considered extremely dangerous to health in sixteenth century Western Europe (Elias 1994) and so it was considered better to let them out.

Comparing different societies' attitudes and practices of defecation in this brief and superficial way is useful only in order to direct attention to how historical and cultural is the act, and to support the argument that it is worth considering defecation as cultural performance, as something enacted daily through relationships with other people. Of course, the Western idea of toilet training as a recognised period of child

development explicitly acknowledges that defecation is a performance that needs to be taught by parents. Child care books advise on methods of doing this, sometimes suggesting games to play with the child in the process. While referred to as training, much of the process takes place through imitation and acting out before the child ever actually becomes “toilet trained”. As well as the examples discussed in chapter three, Isabel mentioned several other aspects of her two and half years old daughter’s process of embodying the practice of defecation. Jessie liked to watch her mother change her baby brother’s nappy and to help clean him, and she also enjoyed playing at putting nappies on her toy cow. She wiped herself with paper after defecating although Isabel added that she wasn’t very good at this (by which she meant she was ineffectual at cleaning herself) but liked to “go through the motions” of wiping. What Jessie was doing through all this was joining in the performance of defecation through playing and copying, “going through the motions”, and in the process embodying a wider understanding of what it is to excrete in modern Britain than merely learning to use a potty or a toilet.

What the idea of toilet training implies, though, is that performance is taught, learned and incorporated by the time a child is about five, after which time it is no longer performed but becomes a natural action that is carried out unthinkingly except when illness or disability interferes. What I hope this thesis has shown is that defecation is always performed in a way that is both expressive and instrumental even when it has become incorporated into a person’s repertoire of natural (that is, embodied) actions. Infants embodying the defecatory performance appropriate to their sociocultural milieu are explicitly corrected or guided by an older person until they can perform effortlessly. In the Western bathroom, the process of defecation once mastered usually takes place out of sight of anyone else. However, the process is still performed even where there is no one else to see it because by the time a person is in a position to defecate alone they have incorporated the performance as part of their natural behaviour; in fact, the very definition of being toilet trained is that they are able to perform correctly even when alone. As we saw in chapter three, even though Freya knew when she needed to defecate, and took steps to control where she did this, she was not considered to be performing correctly because she would not use the toilet.

It may be that where people shit in private there is a wider range of variation in detail than there is where defecation is performed in front of others, and this variation may be handed down through the explicit and lengthy toilet training process. However the overall process is performed within a limited range of cultural possibilities. Spinrad (1994), in his survey on what he called “personal hygiene habits” (see chapter five), asked seven questions about wiping technique which breaks down this one aspect of the performance, and forced respondents to contemplate a single part of a process. Their responses indicate variation, despite their shared broad cultural backgrounds, although they all understood the questions as valid in the context of the subject, that is, although their techniques varied (for example, whether they folded or crumpled the paper, whether they stood up or remained seated) they were within a limited range available and familiar to users of Western style toilets and toilet paper.

It is when one is unable to perform defecation correctly, or when one realises that one does not know *how* to perform ( for example, if the technological apparatus is unfamiliar), that one is made acutely aware of the cultural specificity of performance. While doing fieldwork in a remote village in South India, James Staples (personal communication) was corrected in his manner of holding the water pot when going out to defecate in a field. He had been carrying his pot in the same way he would a cup (with his hand around the side) but was corrected by his male companion to hold it with his hand covering the top. No explanation was given, but this was the correct way to carry the water pot for this purpose. The first time I went to India I asked a (British) friend how to use the squat toilet and she acted out the procedure for me. I could have benefited from Newman’s (1997) guide to “going abroad” in which she includes diagrams and sketches to demonstrate how to use a squat toilet. Although her guide covers different styles of Western toilets, she does not feel the need to give the same detail of instructions for “sit” toilets, presumably because she can assume that her reader would have embodied this knowledge from an early age. Giving detailed instructions on how to get into a squat position, adjust clothing, and clean oneself with water, she recommends that her readers begin to practice a few weeks before they travel to a part of the world where they will be required to perform the act in this way. Newman’s book is a very rare example of an explicit recognition that defecation is performed, that there is a right and wrong way to do it, and that mastery takes practice. Her stick figure diagrams of how to squat and stand up again

afterwards recall choreographic diagrams of ritual dances that are sometimes included in anthropological literature to try to communicate embodied movement (see figure 3 overleaf). Meyer (1994) does not include any diagrams in her semi-humorous book *How to shit in the woods*, but describes different bodily techniques for defecating without a toilet. She recalls a friend demonstrating how he “shits in the woods”, describing his actions as “an adagio of fluid motion and perfect balance ... a marvellous performance”. There is a deliberate irony, intended to be amusing, in her describing his act as if it were a dance, sublimating his demonstration of a base bodily function with images of a ballet, but there is also a recognition that his performance was based on practice and perfection of a technique that he really did perform when out hiking. A friend told me that in preparation for her and her husband’s two year work placement in Nepal with Save the Children they were required (as Newman recommends) to practice squatting and washing with water in their orientation class. This was done with laughter but was nevertheless considered essential physical training for their work, as important as learning the language, and was practised in a similar way to how one would practice skiing technique or, indeed, a ballet position.

When someone is demonstrating to someone else, acting out in front of another person, or practising an unfamiliar position or movement, the action appears explicitly performative. However, I am arguing – like Goffman, Turner and Frankenberg – that action can *always* be considered a performance in that it is instrumental (a means to an end) and expressive (meaningful in itself). The Akan can tell that a man is on his way to the latrine by the way he walks and holds his clothes; his movements are both instrumental in that they may ease the discomfort of walking to the latrine, and expressive in that he communicates his discomfort and is recognised as being uncomfortable and unclean (van der Geest 1998). James Staples had to be instructed how to hold his water pot because his was an incorrect performance. Perhaps it confused the meaning of what he was intending to do because he was holding it as he would a pot of drinking water, or perhaps it was instrumentally incorrect in that he might spill some if he did not cover up the top; perhaps it was both and by carrying it correctly his trip to defecate would be made easier for him and those around him.

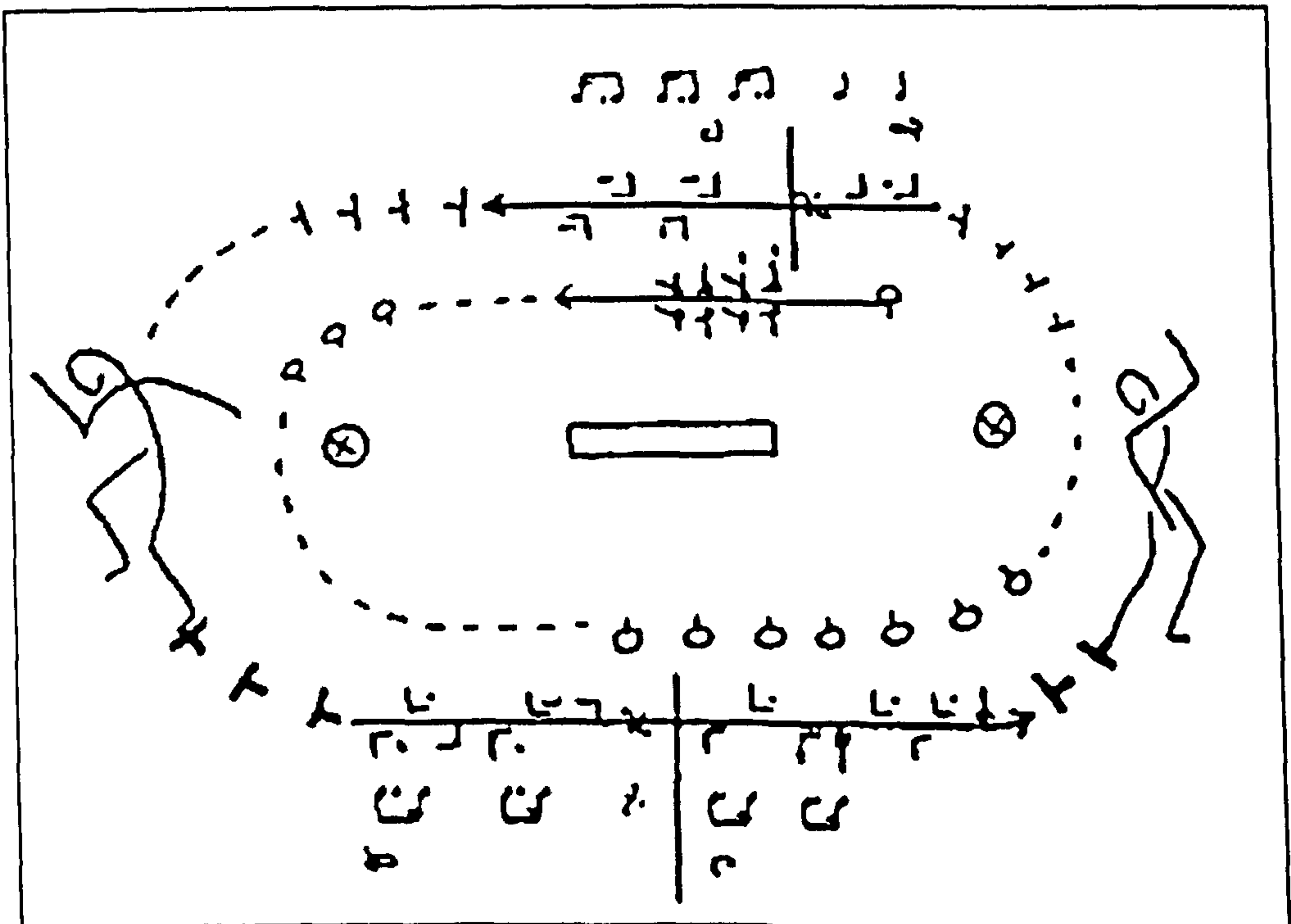
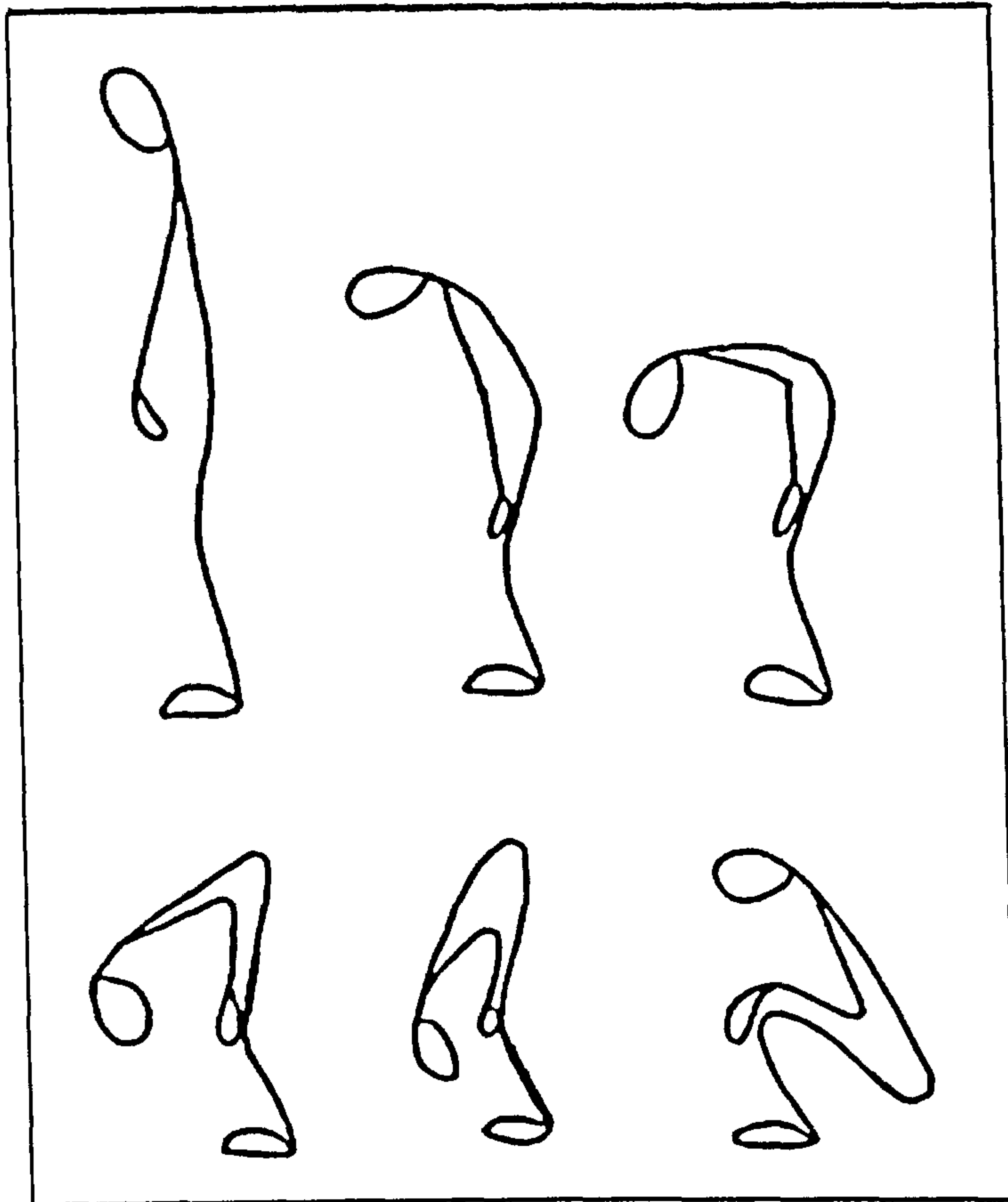


Figure 3

Top: "Analysis of a proper squat" from Newman, E. *Going Abroad* 1997: 3  
 Bottom: "Feather Dance" from Kaeppler, A. "Dance in anthropological perspective" 1978: 39

In chapter two I outlined the idea of performance as developed by Frankenberg (1996) from several writers on dramatic processes, in particular Victor Turner and Erving Goffman. Frankenberg argued that considering sickness as a performative process avoided becoming trapped in medical objectifications such as symptoms or diagnoses. Sickness could be viewed as a process in which symptoms and diagnoses are aspects along with things like (from his examples) not going to school, lying on the sofa and watching television in the day time, eating special food etc. It is useful to think about defecation in a similar way because it allows for an equal consideration of all the aspects discussed in this thesis. It also allows for a recognition that the process of “going to the toilet” does not begin and end with the bowel movement, but includes the process of separating oneself from one’s current activity and space, as well as the reintegration afterwards.

The most important aspect of Frankenberg’s argument about performance is that it is a process through which change takes place. Like sickness – where a person is transformed from one state to another through the process of “being sick” – defecation is transformative. The process of defecation, as understood in modern Britain, is the end result of the transformation of matter from food into waste. The awareness of a need to defecate, and the process of attending to that need, transforms a person through discomfort to comfort, and through uncleanness to cleanness. Looked at in this way, defecation can be considered through Turner’s ideas (following Van Gennep) on ritual processes which are characterised by the three stages of separation, transition and reincorporation.

Turner was most interested in the transitional or liminal phase, and he extended the idea of liminality “to refer to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life”(1975: 47) adding that the condition is often sacred, or can readily become so. However, he did not use it in terms of everyday, mundane activities. Even in his work on post-industrial or complex society, he intended his idea of the liminoid to illuminate social dramas and the production of literature, art and science, rather than ordinary daily acts. To apply his ideas to the act of defecation may seem to be taking them further from how he intended. However, as Turner himself said, we only use theories if they illuminate what we find. Often it is not the theorist’s whole system which illuminates “but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic

context and applied to scattered data. Such ideas have virtue of their own and may generate new hypotheses". (1975: 23). Turner's elaboration of the process of separation, liminality and reintegration can be usefully applied to a non-ritual, ordinary, mundane activity to illuminate the ambiguity of defecation as practised and experienced in modern British life. If defecation is performed, as I have argued, then Turner's theory of social drama is worth considering in this light.

Turner's ideas on liminality and the liminoid illuminate aspects of the modern British experience of defecation in three ways. First, shit itself appears as a liminal entity, created at the margin of the body and symbolically powerful and dangerous. Like Bakhtin's grotesque and the hybrid monsters Turner describes as being created in liminality (where the boundaries are blurred between human and animal, death and life, night and day) excrement is one of our most powerful symbols of transgression, hybridisation and lowliness. Artists have used excrement to mock, subvert or criticise society in various ways in Western culture for centuries, including Chaucer in the fourteenth century, Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Jonson in the sixteenth and seventeenth, and Swift in the eighteenth. Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*, first performed in Paris in 1896, shocked its audience with the utterance of the opening word "Merdre". The superfluous "r" only thinly disguised the French word for "shit", and caused a riot to erupt inside the theatre that lasted for fifteen minutes and re-erupted at every subsequent utterance of the word or appearance of scatological imagery (Shrager 1982: 39). Jarry's use of scatology throughout his play was a deliberate attempt to shock the bourgeois sensibilities of his time both on and off the stage. He wrote later:

I intended that when the curtain went up the scene should confront the public like the exaggerating mirror in the stories of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, in which the depraved saw themselves with dragons' bodies, or bulls' horns, or whatever corresponded to their particular vice. It is not surprising that the public should have been aghast at the sight of its ignoble other self, which it had never before been shown completely. ...Really, these are hardly the constituents for an amusing play, and the masks demonstrate that the comedy must at the most be the macabre comedy of an English clown, or of a Dance of Death. (Jarry 1965: 83 quoted in Shrager 1982: 43-44)

Here, Jarry draws on the liminal entities of hybrid creatures (the audience with dragon's bodies or bull's horns) and carnival (masks, clowns, Dance of Death) to

explain why he was using excremental words and images. His play was, in true liminal style, taking aspects of the status quo and presenting them back in new, shocking ways – and all it took was the utterance of one scatological word, such is the power of excrement. Of course, this reaction to the word was a function of the exclusion of excrement from bourgeois daily life in the late nineteenth century. Three hundred years earlier Jonson could open his play *The Alchemist* with the words “Thy worst. I fart at thee” without generating such a horrified reaction from his audience, although he too relied on the liminal power of excrement to create his play.

But as I have argued throughout this thesis, excrement is more than merely a symbol and defecation is interesting for more than its power to symbolise social transgression. A second way in which the act of defecation can also be considered as a liminal activity is in the way that use of the toilet (in all senses of the word as apparatus, room and act) is set apart in time, place and imagination. In modern Britain we separate ourselves from other people and from current activity to go to a dedicated place in order to defecate, and no matter how long is spent in the act it is unlikely to feature in a person’s description of their daily activities (cf. Elias 1994: 112). Turner described the liminal period as “a cultural realm which is defined as “out of time” i.e. beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines” (V. Turner 1982: 24), and he quotes van Gennep who wrote that novices during the liminal period of a rite of passage are “outside society and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually [in terms of indigenous beliefs] sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous” (van Gennep quoted in V. Turner 1982: 27). In the bathroom or toilet, in the act of defecating, a person is out of touch with what is happening outside (as we saw in chapter three in the examples from *Pulp Fiction*) as well as, one hopes, out of sight, out of sound and out of smell; it is considered impolite even unfair to disturb them, even to talk to them through the door (cf. Bryson 1996:136), and to walk in on someone defecating is shocking for both parties. Shitting is an ambivalent process in that it both cleanses the body of excrement and makes it dirty as it does so, and it also offers both potential comfort (relief from pressure) and discomfort (embarrassment or shame). There is a sense then in which the toilet/bathroom is a liminal space and time through which people are transformed from a state of discomfort to one of comfort, and in the process are in an ambivalent state of being pure and polluted, sacred and profane. As



a social process, liminality emerges in relationships between people and a person can only be in a liminal state vis-à-vis other people. In modern Britain a person enters this transformative state on entering the bathroom because although one may indicate to others where one is headed (directly or euphemistically), it is far less usual to indicate that one is actually going to defecate for the reasons discussed in chapter three. In contrast, for the Akan, as van der Geest showed, a person is already in a liminal state on his way to the latrine and he demonstrates his state to others (and is recognised by others as such) through the way he holds his clothes. He perceives himself to be, and is perceived by others as, unclean, separated from society, no one talks to him or greets him, he does not wish to be greeted.

Following on from the idea of defecation as set apart is the third way in which this activity can be considered liminal; the way that the performance of this act in modern Britain allows for a period of time out from social responsibilities and work. Turner explained post-industrial society in terms of its division between work and leisure, describing leisure as “a betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain between two spells of work or between occupational and familial and civic activity” (1982: 40). Leisure presupposes work as it is non-work or anti-work, a separated period of free-time which is characterised by choice, and which includes attendance to such personal needs as eating, sleeping, and caring for ones’ health and appearance, as well as familial, social, civic, political and religious obligations (1982: 36). The liminal in this setting, where it appears as non-obligatory and individual, he prefers to call the liminoid.

Turner describes leisure time as providing “*freedom from* a whole heap of institutional obligations ...[and] *freedom from* the forced, chronologically regulated rhythms of factory and office and a chance to recuperate and enjoy natural, biological rhythms again” (1982: 36-37). At the same time it offers “*freedom to* enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds ...[and] *freedom to* transcend social structural limitations, freedom to *play* ...[a] release from work’s necessities and something one chooses to do” (1982: 37). As we have seen, defecation provides time out from work and responsibility, as well as a sense of relief that may be experienced as pleasurable. Taking time out of the working day, or from social obligation, to defecate, or merely to hide in the toilet, is to take advantage of the liminal qualities

of this act. During Black Wednesday in September 1992, John Major allegedly hid in the toilet, thus momentarily liberated from structural obligations (Lamont 1999), just as Mira in *The Woman's Room* hid in the toilet to avoid having to meet other people (French 1978). Defecation provides a freedom from obligation through a period of recuperation, although the need to defecate can be experienced both as urgent and demanding immediate action, and also be experienced as an unwelcome interruption that can be ignored or deferred. To break off from work duties to go and defecate has an element of choice in it: the break can be welcomed, taken advantage of, enjoyed as a liminoid activity or it can be taken quickly, as an inconvenient interruption of work, carried out as swiftly as possible so as not to interfere too much, or it can be ignored altogether, put off until later, perhaps when one is back at home where it may be enjoyed more as a private pleasure.

Defecation then is even liminal in its liminality, betwixt and between the liminal and the liminoid. It is liminal in so far as it is experienced as a transitional performance that takes one from discomfort to comfort and from dirty to clean as part of the daily process of living, but liminoid in that it can be experienced as a break from work, or something experienced in leisure time, and can be used as a symbol in art and literature.

Turner's performative theory is useful when considering defecation because it suggests that it is in the relationship between this act and the rest of a person's social activity that its significance lies. It is the structural relationships between people that make defecation liminal.

### **Defecation as embodied control**

To consider defecation as cultural performance is to see it as an activity that is carried out in any particular society in a limited number of ways that both reflect and reveal wider aspects or concerns of that society and at the same time to allow for differences and uniqueness between individuals. The particular cultural performance of defecation in modern Britain reveals an inherent ambiguity and even contradiction in what it means to be a fully functioning person in which control is central.

Lawton (2000: 103-105) criticises the notion of performance as taking for granted an autonomous, fully functioning body that can move and act under its own agency. She questions whether the very sick people in her study who can no longer use their bodies intentionally could be said to be performing, although her descriptions of their withdrawal prior to the final stages of dying suggests that their actions are experienced and interpreted by others as meaningful. At the point when they no longer have control over their bodily actions (paralysis, incontinence, coma), Lawton argues that they lose their sense of self and are no longer fully persons; they are no longer actors because they can no longer act. However, she is taking performance in a very narrow sense of an individual person's conscious or intentional bodily movement (which relies on being able to move) whereas, as I understand it, performance can include inaction as well as action, and includes the context, environment and relationships through which it is performed. By this I mean that a person who has "slipped into a coma" at this point (as opposed to a person in a coma who is expected to recover) is involved in the performance of dying even if they have become an object to other people. Performance, then, seems to remain as a useful concept to describe meaningful instrumental and expressive action.

What Lawton's argument does indicate, though, is the importance of autonomy in the experience of embodiment in the West. In the examples above of situations where adults have to try to learn an unfamiliar technique that is second nature to those around them, it must be remembered that these adults are always already capable of performing the act in their habitual way. This is not the case for the men and women in Seymour's (1998) study on disability and in Lawton's work on patients dying of cancer, who are no longer able to perform the process of defecation in the way that they have embodied since infancy. Loss of sensation and muscle control, loss of limbs or range of movement, or physical destruction of the body's boundary all impede their ability to perform this basic function. Unlike the men and women who need to learn an unfamiliar performance but are still able to perform in their habitual way, the men and women in Seymour's study have lost their ability to perform in a culturally appropriate and embodied way. They liken themselves, and are likened to, children before they are toilet trained, although their situation is very different from infants in that their condition is not seen as natural and may not be temporary. Some of the people in Seymour's study are unable to excrete at all and need enemas or

manual evacuations. The anger and distress conveyed through Seymour's analysis of their discussions emphasises how important and fundamental is the ability to excrete; several of her informants describe this loss as the worst aspect of their disability. What they are expressing is a loss of control over a part of themselves that had previously formed part of their identity as adults. Self-control is epitomised by a non-leaky body and the ability to respond appropriately to its needs and desires. Seymour's informants are unable to do this and struggle to redefine themselves as adults in other ways.

This is shown even more clearly in Lawton's study where she demonstrates that as cancer destroyed their bodily boundaries the patients lost "one of the criteria for personhood by virtue of their lacking the corporeal capacity for 'self-containment'" (2000: 142). Lawton suggests that identity and personhood in the modern West are constituted through this capacity for corporeal self-containment as well as the ability to act as the agent of one's own embodied action and intention and to be able to form meaningful and reciprocal relationships with other people (2000: 7, 156). Through her study of terminally ill patients in the process of dying, she found that as patients lost their ability to move and to contain their bodily fluids, and were gradually separated from social relationships, there was a concomitant loss of self.

Lawton's convincing argument, based on a detailed and harrowing analysis of her participant observation in day care and in a hospice, has important implications for the arguments in this thesis. Lawton focuses on the loss of those fundamental aspects of personhood, while I have been focusing on how those aspects are constituted and reconfirmed over time in daily life. Like Lawton, I have discussed the importance of self-containment for identity, but what has also emerged through my research is the importance of release both for a sense of corporeal autonomy and for the constitution of intimacy with others<sup>54</sup>. This challenges Lawton's insistence that "a bounded, physically sealed, enclosed body" is one of the most important "bodily capacities and attributes" for the realisation and maintenance of selfhood in contemporary England (2000: 7). People's bodies are never sealed (cf. Battersby 1993), and the capacity for

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<sup>54</sup> cf. W. Miller (1998) who argues that the capacity to love another person entails the suspension of disgust towards their bodily products.

release is as important for a sense of autonomy and control. This is implied – but not explicitly stated – where Lawton argues for “the corporeal *capacity* for ‘self-containment’” (my emphasis), because it is the ability to contain (as well as release) that is crucial, not the fact of containment. When ‘Anthony’ in Seymour’s study describes his joy at recovering control over his bowels it is the physical sensation of going to the toilet that is relished (Seymour 1998: 160), not just the fact of regaining continence. ‘Joy’, another of Seymour’s informants, said that she missed “the feeling of wanting to go to the toilet ...the feeling of a full bladder or just going to the toilet. I dream about it all the time.” (1998: 161). What she is expressing here is her embodied memory of what it felt like to need to excrete and to release matter from her body autonomously, with a sense of relief, and her profound sense of loss that she can no longer experience this. This aspect of loss of bowel (and bladder) control seems to have been overlooked in favour of the more visible (and, from Lawton’s work, more olfactory) and social aspects of incontinence or bowel paralysis.

Studies like those of Lawton and Seymour, which consider the consequences of losing a basic bodily function, are very useful for reflecting back on what is taken for granted. However, both Lawton and Seymour seem to have an uncritical idea of what is considered “normal” functioning. Seymour argues that we (that is, people in the West) are taught “to shun and hate the products of our own bodies” and she considers that “continence is, in effect, the conquest of the body by society”, where “the truce between body and society is always precarious” (1998: 156-157). Lawton’s argument, while far more subtle than Seymour’s, also considers continence as a precarious truce between how we are (leaky) and how we ought to be (contained). It is only through a more focused look at how defecation is experienced in daily life that the issue of control can be seen to include the capacity to release as well as the capacity to contain, and that while people do experience anxiety, embarrassment and shame in relation to their bodily products and acts of discharging them, they also experience pleasure and relief. Continence is not, then, as Seymour would have it, the conquest of the body by society, but – to build on Lawton’s phrase – the corporeal capacity for self containment *and* release.

## Controlling performance: performing control

During the early years of childhood the performance of defecation is embodied as part of the process of learning self-control in modern Britain and children by the age of about five are expected to be able to control their projection into the world in various ways as tantrums, biting, soiling and bed wetting, crying etc are all expected to be more or less contained. These kinds of behaviours in older children or adults are considered childish and troublesome because they indicate both an inability to perform correctly (discretely and discreetly) and an inability to control behaviour. Lawton (2000: 142) points out the parallels between the sequestration into hospices of the unbounded bodies of patients with advanced cancer and the way infants are excluded from certain areas of public life because they are incapable of controlling themselves, suggesting that both groups of people are considered as less than persons on account of their leaky, unbounded bodies. However, it is their inability to control their inevitable leakiness that is troublesome, not the fact that they are unbounded; they can neither control their performance, nor perform self-control.

The process of embodying control in childhood and constituting what it is to be a person in Western society does not just involve the children as the process takes place through the relationships between children and their parents and carers, as well as with other children. The following extract from a taped interview with two mothers of young children about the process of toilet training illustrates the involvement of parents in the constitution of self-control, as the two mothers draw parallels between the control of excretion and the control of emotions:

**Helen:** *If you can't encourage your children to control, if your children have tantrums in public or if you can't control your children in other ways, if you can't get your children to control their bodily functions ...then you're [seen as] a bad mother.*

**Fran:** *It's the same as tantrums, isn't it? You stop it immediately, you don't let them have that free flow of whatever it is, screaming, verbal abuse or faeces or wee, you don't let it happen, you control it.*

For these mothers the process of bringing up children and being involved in constituting their children as full persons involves the negotiation of control over their children's bodies in the world (as well as a reconstitution of themselves as "good parents" with control over their own urges to slap, shout at or cry in front of their children in response to their actions). If their children are out of control, they too feel (and feel themselves to be considered by others as) out of control. Performance and control are inextricably linked in the process. Helen feels that her own performance as a mother is judged by others through her ability to control her children and their ability to control themselves.

Toilet training, then, is one part of a wider process through which children *and* adults constitute and re-constitute their ideas of personhood, fundamental to which is the capacity for self-containment and release, autonomy, and the ability to form reciprocal relationships with others. This latter point is crucial because the ability to form meaningful relationships and to communicate and express oneself appropriately are indicators of maturity in the West, and are experienced as the letting out or releasing of part of the self. Fully mature people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain are expected to be able to express themselves and to communicate with others; an inability to do this is considered as harmful to the self, even pathological. Perhaps this is an illustration of what Mellor and Shilling referred to as the changing mode of embodiment from the Protestant Modern body that reached its apotheosis in the nineteenth century to the Baroque Modern form which combines banal associations with sensual solidarities, allowing for relationships that are both contractual and emotional. Autism and Asperger's syndrome, conditions that are associated with inability to express feelings and communicate with others<sup>55</sup>, were first identified in the 1940s and have become an increasing cause for concern in Britain and America such that some (predominantly middle class) parents choose not to immunise their children against potentially fatal infectious diseases believing there to be some risk of autism from the immunisation.

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<sup>55</sup> This is how the condition is represented in the popular imagination rather than how it may manifest itself in a person diagnosed with one or other of the syndromes.

As discussed in chapter two, Freud argued that faeces are experienced by the infant as its first gift to the mother, and Erikson argued that as the child gains control over its bowels it adds holding on and letting go to its repertoire of experience. For both these psychoanalysts, defecation is fundamental to the relationship between child and mother and to the child's ability both to give in to and to assert control. Defecation appears as a medium through which the mother and child can communicate<sup>56</sup> and once again we see that the ability to release is as important as the ability to retain. Through learning to control the holding on and letting go of bowel movements, according to Erikson, children develop autonomy and pride, but also doubt and shame: the extent to which either senses develop depends on the environment in which the child grows up which "must back him up in his wish to 'stand on his own feet' lest he be overcome by that sense of having exposed himself prematurely" (1995: 74). In one of the examples from his therapeutic practice, Erikson explains the four-year old Peter's constipation as caused by/expressing "a conflict which he was unable to verbalize" (1995: 46), he was holding a secret obsessively in his bowels. Through play and conversation with the child, Erikson uncovered the secret, and interpreted the boy's fears back to him and Peter was then able to release his faeces (although Erikson adds that physical therapy was needed too). Following this release, Peter was then able to develop a sense of autonomy which, as Erikson later argues (1995: 258) is so central to American identity. Release of faeces/feelings (motions/emotions) allowed autonomy and also the development of relationships with other people. As I said in chapter two, I am not using the findings of psychoanalysis as evidence but as illustration of how defecation is thought about in contemporary British society. In chapter four I showed that holding on to faeces can be considered (and, I argued, experienced as) a corporeal manifestation of the holding on of feelings, or that talking too much can be referred to as "verbal diarrhoea", or that confessing a secret can be experienced as a physical as well as emotional relief. Psychoanalysis provides an explanation for these experiences which

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<sup>56</sup> This point was made explicit by Isabel who told me that the process of changing her baby's nappy meant that she was very aware of her baby's faeces and used this as a measure of the baby's health. She referred to "poo" as a "barometer" of her child's health, particularly in early infancy, before the baby was smiling. It was the main way (apart from crying) that the baby could communicate information about itself to its mother, even if this was not done intentionally.



has found a resonance throughout Western society. My argument, however, is not that psychoanalysis can explain Western experience and attitude toward defecation, but that anthropological analysis of modern British experience of defecation can offer an explanation of why psychoanalysis seems an acceptable explanation, just as the idea of toxicity presents another acceptable explanation.

The importance of release to a sense of being in control is also discussed by Crawford (1984) in his analysis of the meaning of “health” amongst Americans interviewed in the early 1980s. The idea of control and freedom of choice, he noted, was becoming ever more important in American society and “in the last few years the mandate for control has, in fact, grown, [such] that our notions of self and social reality are more infused with symbols of control” (1984: 78). Health, he found, was understood both as self-control, articulated as a need to constrain consumption of harmful substances and activities, *and* as freedom from restraint and a need to let go and not worry as a release from self-control.

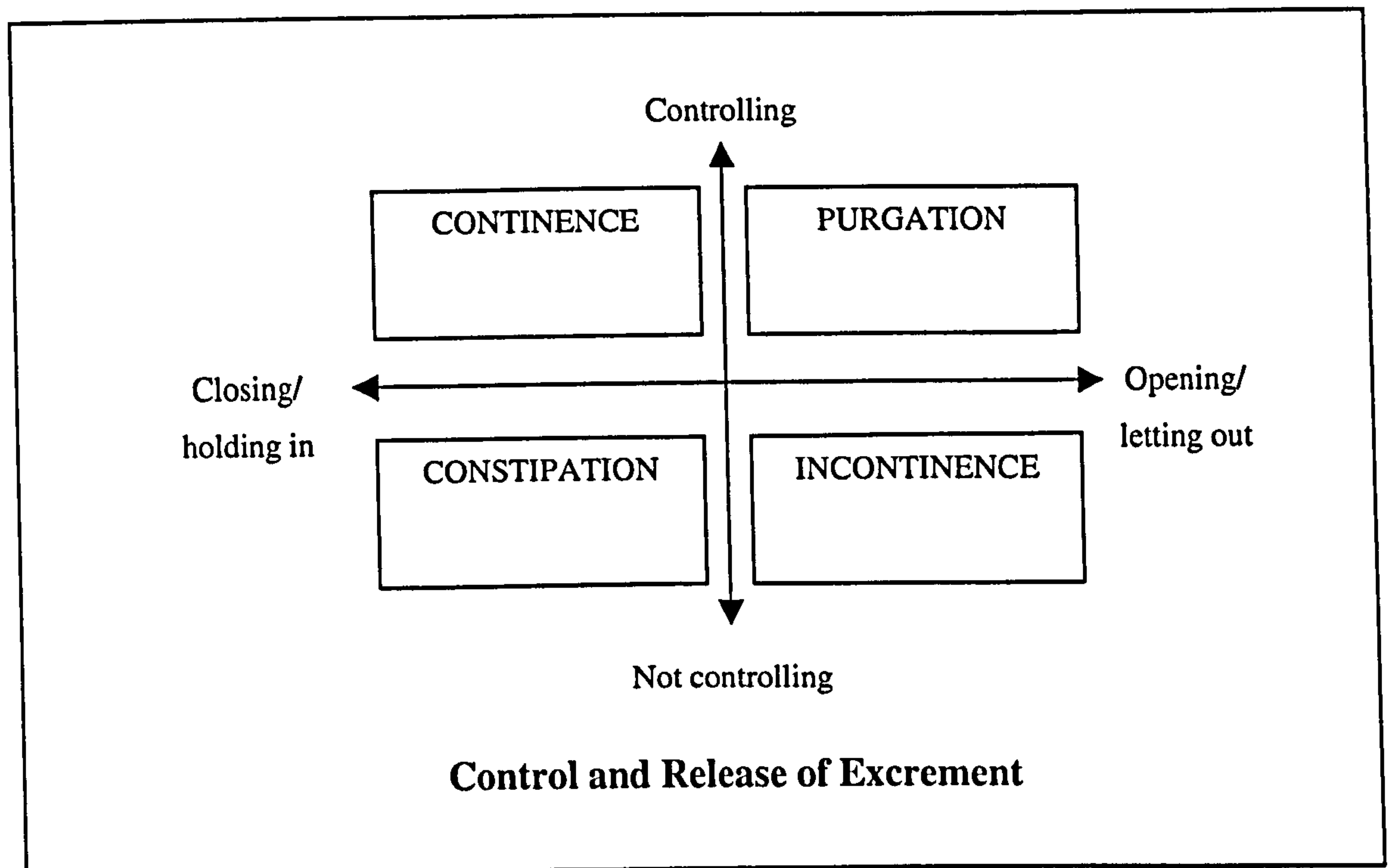
Crawford contrasted the ideas of *control* and *release* as appropriate cultural responses to the conflicting demands of capitalism which requires its citizens to both produce and consume. This contrast equates control with holding in and self-containment. From the discussion of defecation, however, we can see that the idea of self-control as withholding faeces is part of the same process as appropriate release, and rather than contrasting control with release, or self-containment with unboundedness, it is more useful to consider a contrast between embodied self-mastery and loss of control, interplaying with the movement between holding on and letting go.

This can be represented crudely in the diagram below<sup>57</sup> where different bodily experiences of excretion are plotted against an axis of control and loss of control, and an axis of holding in and letting out. Contenance (the capacity for self-containment) can now be contrasted not just to incontinence (uncontrolled release or the inability

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<sup>57</sup> The inspiration for a two-by-two diagram like this came from Douglas’ idea of grid and group (1996: 60) and Frank’s typology of body action in use (Frank 1991: 54)

to self-contain) but also to constipation (used here in a broad sense of the inability to release, including paralysis) and to purgation (the capacity for controlled release).



The normal, desired way for a modern British person to perform defecation is to move effortlessly along the middle section of the horizontal line in the top half of the grid, that is, to be able to hold on when necessary and to release when necessary. Occasionally we may move further to the left, having to suppress the need to defecate for some time until a suitable place is found, for example several people told me that sometimes they may not defecate for several days if staying in an unfamiliar place, and this is not experienced as a conflict (or as constipation) but as the body not needing to defecate during this time. On other occasions we may move further to the right, such as when actively seeking out a purging process like colonic irrigation. It is when we move below the horizontal line that defecation becomes troublesome, particularly in illness and disability, as explored by Seymour and Lawton, but also – as this study has shown – in daily life.

The diagram represents a bodily experience, and also works with other aspects of Western embodiment that I have already linked with excretion, particularly communication. Being “in control” also means being able to keep silent at times and to restrain the expression of emotion (especially in public), and at the same time

implies being able to talk and to express oneself appropriately to others. A person who cannot seem to control the outpouring of his or her speech or emotions may be criticised for being “emotionally incontinent” (Lawson 1998), while someone who does not talk or express emotions may equally be seen as, or feel themselves to be, out of control<sup>58</sup>.

This grid is useful for considering defecation in modern Britain (and perhaps elsewhere in the modern West) but is not intended as a universal model of defecation. It privileges the sense of being in control which is important to Western embodiment and which is based on an understanding of the mind as being able to function independently of the body, and sometimes to be in conflict, as well as the notion of the individual as an autonomous object/subject within society. The idea of self-control as self-restraint entails a concept of will power that can override corporeal needs and drives. Whether expressed in Durkheimian terms of a conflict between society and the individual, or Freudian terms of id and ego, or Cartesian terms of mind and body, this dualism has been shown both to reflect and to structure the experience of modern Western embodiment (see chapter two, and especially Leder 1990). While van der Geest and Loudon both show that the people with whom they lived in different parts of Africa were concerned with constipation and took purges regularly, there is no indication from what they write, nor any reason to assume, that they experienced this as an internal conflict between mind and body, and the grid would be unhelpful to understand their experience. From van der Geest’s brief comments there is a suggestion that relative heat would interplay with the experience of containment and release among the Akan more, perhaps, than control. Similarly, this grid is not useful for considering earlier modern British experiences of defecation where the importance of internal heat and cold, as I showed in chapter four, was critical in the experience of everyday defecation. Pepys, during his “great fitt of the Collique” in October 1663, suffered from difficulty in defecating or passing wind for about two weeks which he linked closely to his internal temperature, blaming the cold for his pain and using fires and blankets as

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<sup>58</sup> Other bodily acts may also fit into this model such as eating (fasting, feasting, anorexia and compulsive eating) or sex (celibacy, promiscuity, frigidity and sex addiction).

part of his self-remedy. From this episode in Pepys it is also clear that “costiveness” was far less preferable to being “loose”, and suggests that an attempt to depict the early modern British experience of defecation diagrammatically would need to emphasise fluidity and flow against stasis and solidity more, perhaps, than release and containment.

Nevertheless, the diagram is useful for considering the arguments in this thesis because it illustrates that a culturally appropriate performance in contemporary Britain is one that is controlled, both in terms of the holding on and the letting go of excrement. It is not the ability to keep body products out of sight and hidden *per se* that defines appropriate defecation, but the capacity to control how and when they are released and contained. This is why the use of defecation or excrement in art and literature is so powerful; the artist, by choosing and controlling the use of scatological material, is maintaining a successful performance, even as he or she shocks the audience by forcing a confrontation with what is normally kept hidden. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that scatology has been a recurring theme in Western art and literature throughout the ages. However, we can now see that there is a difference between early modern use of scatological material where the presence of shit was used to amuse and delight the audience, and the late nineteenth and twentieth century where it is used to shock and disturb, and – in that discomfort – to allow new ideas to be created. Its use as a liminoid entity in the work of artists such as Duchamp, Manzoni, and Ofili (see C. Turner 2000) is only possible, I would argue, in the modern West, not simply because defecation and excrement are more hidden than in earlier times or other parts of the world, but because the audience understands that the artist has *chosen* to expose him or herself in this way. What these artists claim to be doing is to be forcing the audience into a confrontation with the truth about themselves, a truth that the audience has chosen to set aside and ignore. Chaucer’s and Jonson’s use of the scatological, in contrast, is the use of the everyday which bonds them with their audience through laughter and familiarity, and while this kind of use certainly continues into the present day (in what is referred to,

often in a disparaging way, as “toilet humour”) the more serious use of excrement to shock and confront is a modern phenomenon<sup>59</sup>.

Returning to the diagram again, we can now consider the top half as the realm of the liminoid and the bottom half the realm of the liminal, given Turner’s emphasis on freedom and choice in the definition of the liminoid. In the top half, the person is in control whether releasing or containing their excrement, and now also whether choosing to keep it hidden or to expose it to others. In the bottom half, defecation is out of control as the person can no longer choose whether to release or withhold, and may not be able to control whether to keep hidden or expose. Incontinence and chronic constipation can destroy a person’s identity, as Seymour’s informants expressed and as Lawton showed through her fieldwork observations, transforming them from one structural state (a fully functioning person) to another (an object requiring care, and eventually – in Lawton’s work – a corpse). Truly a liminal process of transformation in which defecation and excrement play a major role.

### **Final comments**

This thesis is full of paradoxes. I have argued that defecation is hidden and private in modern Britain, but at the same time have shown that it crops up often in public places. There is plenty written and spoken about it, even while it is considered an unsuitable subject for serious or polite discourse. Despite all the anxieties and embarrassments surrounding it, I had no problem engaging people in conversations about their habits, and often found that the subject was raised independently of my research interest. I have also argued that defecation is simultaneously disdained and avoided as a source of social discomfort and physical disgust, and welcomed as a source of sensual comfort and freedom from social obligation. Excrement can be valued as a resource and disregarded as waste, and used to signify all that is low and all that is real and true. However, if we consider these apparently paradoxical situations from the point of view of performance and control, we can see that they

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<sup>59</sup> While Swift may be considered a forerunner in using excrement to say something about humanity, the fact that his material was of a scatological nature was more troublesome for his later critics than his contemporaries.

are not contradictory but different elements of shifting relationships and embodied experiences. Where I am in control of my performance, I may choose whether or not to defecate at a particular moment, may choose the quality of the environment in which I excrete, may choose whether or not to talk about the subject. Where I am not in control of my performance, defecation may become an uncomfortable or even traumatic experience for me, or those around me, or I may be uncomfortable about talking about it if I feel my identity to be threatened.

Because defecation has been ignored by anthropologists as a social activity, assumptions are implicit in ethnography that all people in any particular society (except the very young and the very sick) manage the task unproblematically, unremarkably and unvaryingly (van der Geest's work being an exception), and a passing comment about where people go to defecate suffices to cover this issue (see for example Malinowski 1932: 375, Fortes 1945: 8, Sapir 1977: 4). Where researchers have looked at the management of defecation in the contemporary West this has mainly been through studies of sickness and disability, where comparisons are drawn with what is normal (i.e. the situation for the non-sick or able-bodied) which are based on assumption and convention rather than systematic observation or lengthy research. It is only by looking at this most mundane of activities in the context of the everyday that the complexity of experience is revealed. Defecation, like many other human activities such as eating or dying, is an inevitable and essential function of being human that is performed in a limited number of culturally appropriate ways. Studying how people perform defecation in any culture is as legitimate an enterprise as studying how they perform or live through their rituals, kinship systems, food production or any other aspect that makes them who they are. By focusing here on defecation in contemporary Britain I have been able to show how the particular way it is performed reflects and reinforces some of the cultural and historical aspects of what is taken for granted in what it means to be human, such as the ideas of the human body and how it works<sup>60</sup>, ideas about gender and about how children become adults. It also reveals cultural values such as the importance of

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<sup>60</sup> In Britain excrement is considered as waste food, rather than – say – as waste humours as Pepys may have thought, or as being mainly made up of bacteria and bilirubin as scientific analysis reveals.

feeling in control and of being able to release and to hold on, the value of comfort and privacy, definitions of cleanliness and dirtiness and so on.

It is perhaps because of the way defecation has come to be performed in the contemporary West that it has been overlooked in academic research. A private and intimate activity, a solitary pleasure or a site of inner conflict and discomfort, a sign of infantile regression, a source of humour and ridicule, a political or artistic statement of truth – defecation and excrement is always there but we are not very comfortable with it becoming a focus of attention because of ideas of decency. Yet this in itself shows it to be a subject worthy of study; when a whole aspect of daily life is wiped from the collective social science consciousness it suggests something powerful and fascinating that demands further attention.

However, the fact that I have chosen this subject for academic study is not a consequence of a desire to shock or to go against the grain. It is no co-incidence, I suspect, that van der Geest held a symposium on shit in Holland in 1998 followed by a special issue of *Medische Antropologie*, that two books on defecation were recently published in Britain<sup>61</sup> and that a 300 page book is about to be published on the history of excretory experience<sup>62</sup>. At the turn of the twenty-first century where the Protestant Modern mode of embodiment, which emphasised control over the body, has been counterbalanced by the Baroque Modern form, marked by “a loosening of the body’s fleshy sensuality from the Protestant taint of sin” (Mellor and Shilling 1997: 186) these works are possible, both in the sense of people interested in writing them and people interested in reading them. Bourke, a century ago, wrote *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* in order to show how far the men and women of Europe and America had evolved from the irrational, aberrant and disgusting habits of their primitive ancestors. He congratulated his readers (a select group as his book was “not for general perusal”) on freeing themselves from any trace of the taint of filth, and for living in a civilised world where excrement played no part in the thoughts of a rational man. One hundred years later, I have written this thesis in order to show how the men and women of contemporary Britain perform and experience defecation. I

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<sup>61</sup> Lewin (1999) and Laporte (2000)

<sup>62</sup> Inglis (due June 2001)

hope that readers (if they are of the same sociocultural milieu) will identify with some of my points and recognise themselves in what I have written. This thesis could not have been written in Bourke's time, just as his book would be out of place now. While issues of decency and embarrassment limit the ways in which I may research and discuss this subject, at the turn of the twenty-first century the very possibility of researching defecation, and from the experiential perspective that I have taken, is a reflection of historical circumstances. In future years, I am sure, discussions about excretion will be as central to the understanding of a culture or society and as well considered as other aspects of daily life.



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