

The Rebellion of the Coprophages

Keith W. Schlegel

Pynchon's famously encyclopedic narratives are so heteroglossic that we should be surprised if they did not include a range of eating and drinking motifs. Pynchon's creative and puzzling onomastics illustrate the point: Meatball Mulligan, Slab, Bloody Chiclitz, Edwin Treacle, Brigadier Ernest Pudding, RC and Moonpie, Mr. Chew, Billy Barf and the Vomitones. More to the purpose here are the descriptions of food, such as "a basket filled with cold eggplant parmigian' sandwiches" in *The Crying of Lot 49*, "a large Basket dedicated to Saccharomantic Appetites, piled to the Brim with fresh-fried Dough-Nuts roll'd in Sugar, glaz'd Chestnuts, Buns, Fritters, Crullers, Tarts" in *Mason & Dixon*, and *Vineland's* Bodhi Dharma pizza, whose crust has "the lightness and digestibility of a manhole cover," and Spinach Casserole made with "UBI, or Universal Binding Ingredient, cream of mushroom soup." The satiric possibilities are obvious.

Food seems significant structurally, especially for openings. *Lot 49* begins with Oedipa's critique of "a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue"; *Vineland* opens with Zoyd Wheeler's breakfast of Froot Loops topped with Nestle's Quik; and the second episode of *Gravity's Rainbow* includes Pirate Prentice's banana breakfast, with its "banana omelets, banana sandwiches, banana casseroles, mashed bananas [. . .] banana blancmange [. . .] banana waffles [. . .] banana mead . . . banana croissants and banana kreplach, and banana oatmeal and banana jam and banana bread."

One eating scene, however, stands in stark, dark and disgusting contrast. Between Pirate's banana breakfast and the feast that Roger Mexico and Seaman Bodine ruin for upper-class guests expecting something other than "Vegetables Venereal in slobber sauce" occurs a scene that may be partly responsible for the advisory board's notorious rejection of *Gravity's Rainbow* for a Pulitzer Prize. This is Brigadier Pudding's sadomasochistic rendezvous with Domina Nocturna and his ritualized coprophagy.

But is it food?

Ordinarily, no; but Pudding does eat the fresh feces from Katje Borgesius, "The Mistress of the Night." If it is eaten, is it food?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.), or *DSM-IV*, defines "Pica" as the "persistent eating of non-nutritive

substances” that is “developmentally inappropriate” and “not part of culturally sanctioned practice” (95). Eating feces is neither sanctioned by any custom I know of nor appropriate to any developmental stage; that feces are also not conventionally nutritive might seem to exclude them as food, if food presumes at least an expectation of nutrition. Excrement may be food for the likes of dung beetles (Gregor Samsa?), but it cannot meet coprophages’ physical needs.

Nor does the means by which the Brigadier consumes the excrement qualify the act as a meal in anthropological terms as explained by Mary Douglas: “Meals properly require the use of at least one mouth-entering utensil per head” (236). In this masochistic eating ritual (far from a proper meal), the excrement slides directly from the anus of the Mistress of the Night into the mouth of the recipient, and Pudding completes this phase of his quest by licking “residual shit [. . .] out of her anus,” praying that she will permit him to linger “with his submissive tongue straining upward into her asshole” (236).

Excrement, unlike food, is not typically a cause in the human digestive tract, but an effect, a waste product, final food for preterites, perhaps, but otherwise the antifeed. As such, shit is associated in *GR* with coal-tar (“‘Earth’s excrement’” [166]), once “[a]lchemically . . . *terra damnata*, the intractable and unusable waste fraction” (George 8), the image of death. Delighting in breaking all sorts of taboos, *GR* may reject the “scatological cynicism” Terry Caesar traces through Bakhtin to “post-Rabelaisian texts” (45); but shit remains even in the pages of *GR* “almost always debasing” (46). Shit does not fertilize the earth in *GR*, Caesar argues, although it does fertilize the text by means of excretion—eliminating profundity and voiding meanings, thus renewing readers for more Mindless Pleasures.

Shit and death and blackness recur conjoined in *GR*, indeed must be conjoined, says Dr. Edwin Treacle, who wants to “show the others [. . .] that their feelings about blackness [a]re tied to feelings about shit, and feelings about shit to feelings about putrefaction and death” (276). As Lawrence Wolfley observes, Pynchon reiterates the connection “just in case we had missed the point” (880) during the imagined encounter between the young Jack Kennedy and Malcolm X in the men’s room of the Roseland Ballroom: “Shit is the presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself inside the whiteman’s warm and private own *asshole*, which is getting pretty intimate” (688).

Excrement, the unusable (entropic) residue of food, comes from food as death comes from life, but shit is as much food as death is life. The categories seem exclusive by design.

Nonetheless, if we think of food not only literally as physically life-giving but also figuratively as meeting emotional or sexual or spiritual needs, then the proof is in the Pudding, who makes shit into food by ritually eating it. Just as "the advent of mauve [the first synthetic, new color] apotheosized coal-tar from rejected waste to prime matter" ("alchemy is cyclical; the end is the beginning") (George 8), so Pudding seeks through his feces-eating to transform shit into a kind of gold, to create or recreate, to complete a circle, as "[h]e leans forward to surround [Katje's] hot turd with his lips [. . .] thinking of a Negro's penis [. . . and] the smell of Passchendaele" (235) and of the Salient where "only 70% of his unit" died (77). Clearly Katje's feces feed something in Ernest Pudding.

Aged (about eighty) and infirm, Pudding is given antibiotics to combat the *E. coli* infections likely to result from his regular diet of feces. Pudding may be a pathetic tool of Dr. Ned Pointsman, the de facto director of "The White Visitation," for which Pudding is but a figurehead, but like other, figurative, shit-eaters in this novel, Pudding is finally a sympathetic character, certainly more so than Pointsman or Pointsman's analogue on the German side, Weissmann/Blicero.

Besides, food in any current popular American sense does not require nutritional value. In fact, as Billy Pilgrim notes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, some products boast of "contain[ing] no nourishment whatsoever" (73). And if Douglas's characterization of meals is accurate,¹ then the perverse intimacy of the scene of Pudding's "excremental sublime," of "blockage and release" as "defecation rites" (Dainotto 37), links it with rites for an "honored guest," whose honor here is his humiliation.

What are the classes of coprophagy? And why does Pudding eat shit?

Feces-eating falls into two main categories: interspecific (or interspecies) and intraspecific coprophagy. Flies, dung beetles, some rodents, bears (who love to raid outhouses) and dogs eat the feces of other species for nutrition. Dogs especially like cat shit, apparently for its protein. A notable example of human interspecific coprophagy occurs in John Waters's film *Pink Flamingos*, when Divine scoops up and eats a dog turd.

Dogs, rabbits and some rodent herbivores eat their own species' excrement to recapture undigested nutrients, much as ruminants, such as cows, re-eat their food. Rabbits may sometimes eat (or re-eat) their own feces to retrieve vitamins produced in their intestines, vitamins that cannot be absorbed through intestine walls: this behavior is autocoprophagic.

Clinically, when humans perform intraspecific coprophagy, it is most often a compulsive or involuntary behavior, the result of mental illness, autism or retardation, or of accident, as in Austin Powers's drinking diarrhea in *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Regrettably, we all eat shit by accident, the consequence of careless handwashing (ours or others') or of a poor public sanitation system: cholera often results. Involuntary but intentional intraspecific coprophagy occurs as torture, as in Pasolini's gross-out film *Salo*.

Brigadier Pudding's shit-eating is intraspecific, voluntary, intentional, nonauto-, heterosexual coprophagy. Given the ever-tightening taxonomy, we might imagine his type to be extraordinarily rare. But any functional search engine will point to websites devoted to the practice, complete with photographs. The conclusion is inescapable: Brigadier Pudding is hardly alone in finding masochistic, sexual pleasure in eating shit. For John Hamill, borrowing from Rene Girard, the scene in *GR* is "in the masochistic tradition of metaphysical triangulation" (56), in which a person desires a transcendent something that is impossible to possess and so settles for a mediator. In our instance, Pudding has the desire; Katje, in the role of Domina Nocturna, is the mediator, or rather, her shit is. What then is the transcendent object of desire?

Hamill concurs with Paul Fussell that the object is a recovery of the experience of Passchendaele, a rediscovery of the reality of war as Pudding had lived it a generation before. Now, during the Second World War, he is trapped in a paper and bureaucratic war of intelligence, trapped by technology and "cliques of spiritualists, vaudeville entertainers, wireless technicians, Couéists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, Dale Carnegie zealots" (77), not to mention his puppet-master, the manipulative and sinister Pavlovian Pointsman, who is frequently associated with excrement. Like an inversion of Yeats's "Magi," Pudding hopes "to find once more . . . The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (ll 6, 8). His experience in the trenches was marked by the smell and taste of shit: "The mud of Flanders gathered into the curd-clumped, mildly jellied textures of human shit, piled, duckboarded, trenched and shell-pocked leagues of shit in all directions" (79). In addition to the "vertigo [and] nausea" that take him back to the First World War, Pudding seeks and enjoys physical pain: "Above all, pain. The clearest poetry, the endearment of greatest worth" (235). That pain is embodied in Domina Nocturna, who had ranged above No-man's Land gathering young dead men into her arms. For Fussell the encounter is "a fantastic scene, disgusting, ennobling, and touching, all at once. And amazingly rich in the way it manages to fuse literal with figurative" (333).

Naturally, Pudding is doomed. His past cannot be recovered any more than the dead can return (except through the novel's séances), and his escape into the realm of the Mistress of the Night is temporary at best. He becomes ill—"The Borgesius woman still performs her nocturnal duties, but with the Brigadier ill now (has the old fool been forgetting his antibiotics? Must Pointsman do everything?)" (273)—and then dies "of a massive *E. coli* infection" (533). He is mentioned only once more after that (apart from a passing reference), as a spiritual "member of the Counterforce," with "even more of a mouth on him" than he had when alive. As a persistent presence, Pudding, with his "devotion to culinary pranksterism," inspires the scatological "repulsive stratagem" (715) by which Mexico and Bodine escape the machinations of the VIPs.

Shit-eating is not, indeed, a general theme in *GR*, although shit is, and eating is, both motifs drawing readers repeatedly back (as Pudding wished for himself) from abstractions and rationalized structures to the body.

For Wolfley, *GR* illustrates Norman O. Brown's concept of history as deriving ultimately from repression, which splits the self into subject and object, thereby creating consciousness and civilization. Only the polymorphously perverse, whose eroticism is unrestrained by guilt, can escape the effects of repression that will, Brown argues, likely lead to human self-destruction. The "unwillingness to die" paradoxically causes an "inability to live, an inability to live in and for the body and be satisfied with just being here" (Wolfley 875). Tellingly, Pudding prepares for his orgiastic ordeal by stripping "bare as a baby" (233): only infants can truly be polymorphously perverse.

The progress of Pilgrim Pudding toward *Domina Nocturna* inverts the ascent to the Merkabah in Kabbalistic lore. Steven Weisenburger (122) traces Pynchon's source to Gershom Scholem's delineation of the seven antechambers to the throne of God. The sequence also inverts and parodies the quest for the grail, as Fussell observes. Pudding himself understands the ritualized quality of the approach and the tests he must pass to continue, attributing the allegorizing of the journey to Pointsman. The central scene itself inverts and parodies the Christian sacrament of communion, employing ritualized tones that support Pudding's assignment of symbolic, even religious, values to shit: "He gags, but bravely clamps his teeth shut. Bread that would only have floated in porcelain waters somewhere, unseen, untasted—risen now and baked in the bitter intestinal Oven to bread we know" (235–36). According to Bakhtin, when Espistemone in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* breathes, yawns, sneezes and finally farts ("'He's healed now all right!' Panurge exclaimed" [Rabelais 272]), "The flatus appears as the symbol

of life and the true sign of resurrection. . . . [H]ere the anus symbolizes resurrection" (382-83). For Pudding, too, the anus promises a kind of resurrection, although the anus is not his own, and the resurrection is to death.

Who else eats shit? Pudding may be the only literal shit-eater in the novel, but all the other characters are, like Pudding, forced or induced figuratively to eat shit by Them, the Elect, the faceless ones in the Firm who control both sides during the war. They control even the controllers Pointsman and Weissmann/Blicero, whose tools, Pudding and Katje, do as they are told during the coprophagic encounter. As in *The Crying of Lot 49*, pervasive paranoia results in a simplified dualism: They and We. Pirate tells Roger, "'Of course a well-developed they-system is necessary—but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system—'" (638). Osbie Feel adds, "'We piss on Their rational arrangements. Don't we . . . Mexico?'" (639). Indeed Roger has done just that two pages earlier, pissing all over the table and the papers and the big shots assembled in Clive Mossmoon's office. If "eating shit" means putting up with nonsense, being humiliated, being controlled, obeying, then probably all the 300-plus named characters eat some kind of shit until some of them rebel, as Pudding did not.

Immediately after Roger's instruction in creative paranoia, those assembled in Pirate's maisonette join in "a counterforce travelling song" (639) of revolt against Them, against the System. Echoing Cummings's poem "I sing of Olaf glad and big" ("There is some s. I will not eat" [l 33]), the song concludes: "And there's shit you won't be eating any more— / They've been paying you to love it, / But the time has come to shove it, / And it isn't a resistance, it's a war" (640).

Roger still has a little shit to eat—losing Jessica to Jeremy—but his glorious rebellion at the dinner Jeremy invites him to with Them, "the Opposition" (713), completes the shit-eating motif. When Bodine sees first Roger's head as part of the feast—"head cheese!"—and then himself as part of it too, he utters the code word "'ketchup'" (714), and the fun begins. Bodine, Mexico and even Connie Flamp rattle off their preferred menu, including "'pus pudding,'" "'scum soufflé,'" "'snot soup,'" "'menstrual marmalade,'" "'discharge dumplings,'" "'slime sausage,'" "'clot casserole,'" "'Puke pancakes,'" "'leprosy loaf,'" "Toe-jam tarts" and other alliterative delights. Also included in this litany are items with coprophagic intent, as our heroes make those who make others eat shit eat shit—"Hemorrhoid hash,'" "'bowel burgers'" and "Diarrhea Dee-lite." The "well-bred" Elect flee, gagging, threatening reprisal (715-17; Pynchon's emphases). Again, preterite

Mexico and Bodine owe their repulsive stratagem to Brigadier Pudding, that other loser whose unusual tastes inform the scene, offering to Them Their just deserts/desserts, a Pudding of shit. What goes around comes around.

Brigadier Pudding exited his scene with Katje hoping to die "in the hours just before dawn" (236), and his hope is fulfilled (533). After the dinner guests depart the gross-out meal, the "last black butler" also makes his escape from all the shit he has had to endure. He contributes a dessert for his former masters—"Pimple pie with filth frosting, gentlemen"—and is metaphorically united with Pudding and the other reprobates in the episode's final sentence: "And just at the other side of dawning, you can see a smile" (717). That smile—or the smile of any other character or any reader longing to escape from the power of the Firm—is a sweet revenge: it is, in the vulgar expression, a shit-eating grin.

—Frostburg State University

Note

¹"Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen and family." "Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance" (236).

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, M. M. *Rabelais and His World*. 1940. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge: MIT P, 1968.
- Caesar, Terry. "'Trapped inside Their frame with your wastes piling up': Mindless Pleasures in *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Pynchon Notes* 14 (1984): 39-48.
- cummings, e e. "[I sing of Olaf glad and big]." 1931. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Norton, 1973. 534-35.
- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- Dainotto, Roberto Maria. "The Excremental Sublime: The Postmodern Literature of Blockage and Release." *Postmodern Culture* 3.3 (1993): 53 pars.
- Douglas, Mary. *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975.
- George, N. F. "The *Chymische Hochzeit* of Thomas Pynchon." *Pynchon Notes* 4 (1980): 5-22.
- Hamill, John. "Looking Back on Sodom: Sixties Sodomasochism in *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Critique* 41.1 (1999): 53-70.

- Pink Flamingos*. Dir. John Waters. Dreamland, 1972.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking, 1973.
- Rabelais, François. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. 1532-1564. Trans. Jacques Le Clercq. 1936. New York: Modern Library, 1942.
- Salo, the 120 Days of Sodom*. Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini. PEA, 1975.
- The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Dir. Jay Roach. Moving Pictures, 1999.
- Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr. *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or, The Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death*. 1969. New York: Dell, 1971.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.
- Wolfley, Lawrence C. "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel." *PMLA* 92.5 (1977): 873-89.
- Yeats, W. B. "The Magi." 1914. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1956. 124.