History of Shit
Dominique Laporte
translated by Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury

Written in Paris after the heady days of student revolt in May 1968 and before the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, History of Shit is emblematic of a wild and adventurous strain of 1970s’ theoretical writing that attempted to marry theory, politics, sexuality, pleasure, experimentation, and humor. Radically redefining dialectical thought and post-Marxist politics, it takes an important—and irreverent—position alongside the works of such postmodern thinkers as Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, and Lyotard.

Laporte’s eccentric style and ironic sensibility combine in an inquiry that is provocative, humorous, and intellectually exhilarating. Debunking all humanist mythology about the grandeur of civilization, History of Shit suggests instead that the management of human waste is crucial to our identities as modern individuals—including the organization of the city, the rise of the nation-state, the development of capitalism, and the mandate for clean and proper language. Far from rising above the muck, Laporte argues, we are thoroughly mired in it, particularly when we appear our most clean and hygienic.

Laporte’s style of writing is itself an attack on our desire for “clean language.” Littered with lengthy quotations and obscure allusions, and adamantly refusing to follow a linear argument, History of Shit breaks the rules and challenges the conventions of “proper” academic discourse.

Dominique Laporte, who died in 1984 at the age of thirty-five, was a psychoanalyst and the coauthor of François national: Politique et pratiques de la langue nationale sous la Révolution Française.

A DOCUMENTS BOOK

“Laporte’s postmodern tangents and eccentric writing style pose a challenge to academic and societal conventions of ‘clean language.’”
—Publishers Weekly

“Few manage to link so many ideas, as Laporte has done so effortlessly.”
—Architecture

“... Laporte’s inquiry is as rich, witty, and exhilarating as it is intellectually adventurous.”
—Adam Newey, New Statesman

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DOMINIQUE LAPORTE

translation by
Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury, with an
introduction by Rodolphe el-Khoury

A DOCUMENTS BOOK
To the young
Flaubert,
for the beautiful explanation
1. the gold of language, the luster of scybala
2. cleaning up in front of one's house, heaping against the wall
3. the colonial thing
4. non olet

5. make-up

6. "i’m with shakspeare”
   [sic]

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notes
introduction

Rodolphe el-Khoury

Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit* ties the concept of the individual to the fate of human waste and, in a twist that Georges Bataille would have certainly appreciated, the history of shit becomes the history of subjectivity. This conflation of the “highest” forms of consciousness with the “basest” of human products is examined in various instances of discourse and practice, language and experience. The subtitle to the French edition, “Prologue,” frames the book as a beginning—a prehistory to modernity and the modern subject.

In *History of Shit*, Laporte considers the semantic atrophy of the olfactory field, a condition he relates to the Royal Academy’s systematic cleansing of the French language, whose malodorous features were stifled by a thorough editing of its excremental vocabulary throughout the seventeenth century. Laporte’s earlier and better-known book, *Le Français national: politique et pratiques de la langue nationale sous la Revolution Française*, co-authored with Renée Balibar, offers a detailed history of similar institutional efforts that shaped official French, focusing on the instrumental role of a streamlined and rationalized language in the construction of a centralized capitalist state.¹

One can imagine *History of Shit* as a by-product of *Le Français national*—an aberrant discursive surplus that would have corrupted the balanced logic of that more traditional Marxist text, had it not been “laundered” by scrupulous editors. In *History of Shit*, Laporte freely indulges his scatological proclivities, drawing on
the psychoanalytic frameworks of Freud and Lacan and holding Marx and Althusser at an uninhibiting arm’s length.²

That *History of Shit* might be considered recycled waste would certainly have appealed to Laporte, given the leitmotif of the book: the return of excrement to fields of cultural production and consumption whose proper operation depends on its repression. The notion is also entirely consistent with Laporte’s parody of academic discourse,³ and with his convoluted prose, which this translation attempts to preserve; for it stands as a backhanded attempt to reverse the deodorization of language by means of a reeking syntax.

Lest anyone take his scatological fixation too seriously, Laporte states his critical ambition in quasi-Nietzschean terms: “All we can hope to do is remove a few masks with the roar of our laughter, laugh them off the figures of power.” Herein lies the redeemable (and formidable) value of this excremental excursus—in its conjunction of the ridiculous with the profound, which has insights sparking with every claim of Laporte’s “gay science.” Readers will no doubt laugh along with the author at the outrageous claims—both reported and argued—in this book, but the speculative trajectories that Laporte engineers at such dizzying speed are no laughing matter when followed through to their grave conclusions.

Consider, for example, Laporte’s reading of the Royal Edict of Villers-Cotterets from 1539, and its staggering social, cultural, and even environmental implications. The Edict decreed the private management of waste—“to each his shit.” Laporte recognizes here the beginning of a formative historical process and goes on to map the construction of the “I” across private and public spheres, reconfigured in the domesticization of individual waste and odor,
and with respect to institutional strategies of waste management and deodorization.

According to Freud, the decline of the olfactory sense was an inevitable outgrowth of the civilizing process, set in motion when man adopted an erect posture. From that point, he argues, "the chain of events would have proceeded through the devaluation of the olfactory stimuli and the isolation of the menstrual period to the time when visual stimuli were paramount and the genitals became visible and thence to the continuity of sexual excitation, the founding of the family and so to the threshold of civilization."\(^4\) Laporte’s *History of Shit* is consistent with Freud’s general outline insofar as it recognizes the decline of the olfactory, exploits the tensions between the private nose and the public eye, and situates a historical turning point at the founding of the family.

However, the family, as conceived by Laporte, was founded in the relatively recent past. It is the social and mental construct that Annales historians have studied as a corollary to capitalist economy. The institution of a bourgeois family experience in which the odor of shit became the absolute negative reference for olfactory apprenticeship also gave rise to the individualized body and the environment that materialized its separation. Hence the consequences of Laporte’s analysis are far-reaching: not only is the new olfactory economy constitutive of a bourgeois subjectivity, its effects should also be sought in the transformation of the built environment, of such things as domestic furnishing and public squares, into segregated and rationalized milieus.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Jean-François Blondel advocated a freestanding bed in accordance with the latest medical opinion on the hazards of poorly ventilated niches or alcoves. But
the long historical process of the privatization of sleep had already set the ground of possibility for this architectural solution. The discomfort—moral and physical—with the promiscuity of the collective bed, manifested most tangibly in the olfactory intolerance of the odor of the other, prefigured the emergence of the individual bed, its detachment from architecture and its articulation as a discrete element in the space of the bedroom.⁵

The individual tomb is more narrowly a product of the eighteenth century and therefore more explicitly related to public health guidelines for the reorganization of urban space. Yet their logic was still largely olfactory and thus equally resonant with Laporte’s analysis. Vic D’Azyr, for example, recommended a four-foot distance between separate graves in cemeteries; individualization and separation were designed to keep the “morbific rays” that emanated from the corpses from intermingling in deadly brews.⁶ What quickly became an issue of personal dignity was initially sought in terms of individual odor and public promiscuity: to each his cesspool and to each his grave.

The same olfactory/excremental factors that transformed body, bed, and tomb into distinct spatial units were operative at the level of the building and the city. Their influence is clearly demonstrated in the evolution of the hospital during the second half of the eighteenth century, a process in which many recent studies have recognized the emerging physiognomy of modern space.⁷ Its characteristic feature is discernible in the consistent compartmentalization and fragmentation of space into discrete components with sharp edges and clearly delineated contours.

For instance, in Jean-Baptiste Le Roy’s 1777 proposal for a new Hôtel Dieu to the Académie, the wards are isolated and
aligned as separate pavilions. “By means of this disposition,” he argued, “each ward is like a kind of island in the wind, surrounded by a considerable volume of this fluid so that winds can carry off and renew it easily by the free access between them.”

A single and easy step separates architectural reforms in hospital and cemetery design from public health policies, large-scale urban interventions, and utopian schemes for ideal cities.9 Hence Nicolas Ledoux’s ideal city of Chaux, where the traditional urban organization is entirely relinquished in favor of an open and expanded field with freestanding structures. The buildings of Chaux are "independent of all adherence,” surrounded by air, much like Jean-Baptiste Le Roy’s "islands in the wind.” Ledoux radicalized the general tendency toward looser and more permeable urban fabrics formulated in numerous eighteenth-century treatises and partially tested in the "openness” of the Place Louis XV. In Observation sur l’architecture (1765), for example, Marc-Antoine Laugier advocated the olfactory and acoustical advantages of larger urban blocks, which could accommodate independent houses within the ventilated and shielded space of a vast courtyard. Ledoux went even further, exploding the city into a vast territory of unobstructed expanses and atomized freestanding structures, thereby inaugurating two centuries of modernist town planning and suburban sprawl.

The cascading logic—which allows the water closet to flow so effortlessly into modern suburbia—accounts for the power and shock value of this book. The line of reasoning I extended from the history of shit to the history of architecture and the city may be too smooth a trajectory for Laporte’s irregular thoughts. Still, his theoretical leaps have shown to be very effective when channeled into
linear and “proper” paths. Several historians, myself included, have indeed exploited Laporte’s “crude” material with favorable results. Shit, Laporte tirelessly reminds us, is continually being recycled into gold. *History of Shit* yields similar riches to readers who dare to probe.
HISTORY OF

shit
1


the gold of language,
the luster of scybala

Language speaks and asks:
"why am I beautiful?
Because my master bathes me."
—Paul Éluard, Capitale de la Douleur (1926)

Without a master, one cannot be
cleaned. Purification, whether by fire or by the word, by baptism
or by death, requires submission to the law. It is thus, because it
has been written:

In 1539 on the 15th of August, the Day of the Assumption of
the Immaculate Virgin impregnated by the Word, the Ordinance of
Villers-Cotterets announced that henceforth justice would be ad-
ministered and civil documents and notarized acts registered in the French language:

To ensure that the significance of the aforementioned edicts is clear beyond doubt, our wish and command is that these be executed and written with a clarity that will remove all ambiguities or uncertainties which may give rise to subsequent interpretations than the ones intended.

As similar situations have often arisen in the past with regard to the significance of the Latin words contained in the aforementioned materials, we declare that henceforth all edicts, as well as other procedural documents originating in our sovereign courts as well as in subaltern or secondary institutions—be these registers, inquests, contracts, commissions, sentences, testaments, or any other and sundry acts, judicial writs, and their subsequent materials—shall be pronounced, registered, and delivered to the appropriate parties in no other than the maternal French.

In November of that same year, a second edict appeared, which until now has yet to enjoy a similar entitlement to glory. We therefore need exhume it for its substance, and in so doing, may as well abandon ourselves, albeit briefly, to the strange beauty of its language.

François, King of France by the Grace of God, makes known to all present and all to come our displeasure at the considerable deterioration visited upon our good city of Paris and its surroundings, which has in a great many places so degenerated into ruin and destruction that one cannot journey through it either by carriage or on
horseback without meeting with great peril and inconvenience. This city and its surroundings have long endured this sorry state. Furthermore, it is so filthy and glutted with mud, animal excrement, rubble and other offals that one and all have seen fit to leave heaped before their doors, against all reason as well as against the ordinances of our predecessors, that it provokes great horror and greater displeasure in all valiant persons of substance. These scandalous and dishonorable acts are the work of corrupted individuals who sojourn and assemble in this our city and its surroundings. The corruption and stench that accompany the aforementioned muds, mucks, and other offals have been borne in times past without cause. As we consider the aforementioned situation, as it has been put before us by several people in our council, as well as other notable individuals, we find it necessary to take hasty precautions and seek appropriate remedies for the righteous governance of this our city and its surroundings, towards which we feel a singular affection as is the rightful due of the principal and most notable city of our kingdom. We have ordained, and by way of this present communication, we ordain and command the perpetual, fixed, and irrevocable implementation of the following declarations:

Article 4. —We forbid all emptying or tossing out into the streets and squares of the aforementioned city and its surroundings of refuse, offals, or putrefactions, as well as all waters whatever their nature, and we command you to delay and retain any and all stagnant and sullied waters and urines inside the confines of your homes. We enjoin you to then carry these and promptly empty them into the stream and give them chase with a bucketful of clean water to hasten their course.
Article 15. —We forbid all and any persons to leave or dispose of any manner of fodder, animal wastes, soots and ashes, mud or any other kind of unspeakable wastes on the streets. Nor may these streets be used for conflagrations or the slaughter of pigs or beasts of any kind. Indeed, we enjoin such persons to collect droppings and wastes and to gather them inside their homes, where they shall pack them into receptacles and wicker baskets to be then carried outside the aforementioned city and its surrounding areas.

Article 21. —We enjoin all proprietors of houses, inns, and residences not equipped with cesspools to install these immediately, in all diligence and without delay.

Article 23. —And to this end we wish and order that all municipal officials from the various quarters and their respective subdivisions be held individually accountable to present and report in writing in the presence of our city magistrate or his lieutenant, within fifteen days of the present publication, each house in each and every quarter that is not equipped with a cesspool. In the eight subsequent days, the lords and owners of said houses, or the concierges and tenants must be informed within three months after the first injunction, which will be recorded, that they must build the aforementioned cesspools and earth closets or risk the penalty of the confiscation of their abodes, and if these abodes are churches or mortmain properties, they shall be deprived of pensions and rents ensuing from these aforementioned properties for the duration of ten years.
Article 24. —And it is our wish that, immediately after the lapse of
the predetermined time, if the lords and proprietors have not met the
demands of the injunction, their houses shall be handed over to us as
confiscated property that shall pertain to us, without exception and
with no need of additional warning, save for those mainmortes
properties which shall be seized prior to the rest.

...  

Article 28. —And we also forbid all butchers, meat vendors, meat
roasters, bakers, small retailers as well as vendors of fowl and poul-
try, tavern keepers, laborers, artisans, and all manner of other per-
sons whatever their state or condition from keeping in any area of our
city or its surroundings, or having some other person keep or breed,
swine, sows, pigs, goslings, pigeons, and rabbits whether these be for
sale, for nourishment, for the sustenance of their households, or for
any other pretext, rhyme, or reason.

Article 29. —And we enjoin all of the above, who keep or breed swine,
sows, pigs, goslings, rabbits, and pigeons in the aforementioned
places, to make haste and take or carry, or entrust the taking and
carrying to others of all the aforementioned swine, sows, pigs,
goslings, pigeons, and rabbits to be bred and fed beyond the city and
its surroundings under penalty of the confiscation of those things
herein named, and risk suffering corporal punishment as well; and
we also enjoin all others to identify these wrongdoers and to de-
nounce them to the law as swiftly as possible and in so doing find
themselves entitled to a third part of the profits, and in failing to
comply find themselves punished and subjected to an appropriate
fee.

...
Article 31. —We wish these present ordinances published every month of the year in all the crossroads of the city of Paris and its surroundings to the accompaniment of public fanfare. They should moreover be written in large letters on parchment and suspended in the most eminent places to be found in the sixteen quarters of the aforementioned city of Paris and its surroundings, so that their content may be known and understood by all, and it will be forbidden to remove the aforementioned displays on pain of corporal punishment to be dealt by the police commissioner of each quarter.

The edict was handed down in Paris in the twenty-fifth year of grace of the reign of Françoise I, and "thus signed by the King, Bayard, and sealed with the great green wax seal and silk ribbon."

_EX QUO APPARET LATRINAM A LAVANDO DICTAM ESSE_

Besides the coincidence of their mutual ordinance in 1539, is there any reason to place these two legal texts side by side? None perhaps, except the one provided by Varron in Book II of _de Analogia_, wherein the word "latrine" is said to derive from the word _laver_ [to wash] (Ex quo apparet latrinam a lavando dictam esse). In the end, the accuracy of Varron's etymology is hardly our true concern. Suffice to say his claim is credible; we invoke it here primarily for the light it sheds on the peculiar organization of knowledge that was the Renaissance.

If language is beautiful, it must be because a master bathes it—a master who cleans shit holes, sweeps offal, and expurgates city and speech to confer upon them order and beauty.
And what did the King’s counselor advise? "What did the Roman people and their princes do," he asked, "when they were keepers of the greatest kingdom on earth and wished to expand it and make it eternal? They found no surer method than the refinement of their Latin tongue, which in the early days of their empire was rather meager and crude. Thus enriched, their language, along with the Roman law lodged therein, spread throughout their conquered realm.” In such a land, where the marriage of language and law is fully consummated, its subjects will most readily adapt themselves "to French manners and mores,” until "repeated use makes them all almost the same.”

Latin was stale. It smelled of stagnant scholasticism and musty classrooms, of esoteric and ambiguous knowledge. "We have difficulty agreeing on the significance of Latin words," said the Edict of Villers-Cotterets. A murky language for a murky city.

But is elimination sufficient? Or must one purify and polish the diamond, "root for pearls even amidst the manure of Ennius” (as another legislator of the lingua franca would urge two and half centuries later), wash and police the language so that none who spoke it need "fear pollute his mouth.”

The writer and grammarian, no less than the King, wanted language discharged. But, like the city, it had for so long held in all manner of "mud, animal excrement, grit, and other filth” that they had to climb into the gutter to clean it.

DISCHARGING THE BOOK

In his note to the reader of the Odes, Ronsard forewarns that he has done away with the "y,” which the grammarian Meigret neglected
to "completely blot out." If Ronsard chose to retain other diphthongs, such as "yeux," in their "old corrupted forms with their un
bearable stacking up of letters that bespeak both our ignorance and poor judgment," it is only because he was satisfied with the extent to which he had "discharged his book of its burdensome load."³

Strictly speaking, the cleansing of language is less a political act than an economic one. Language is liberated from excess, from a corrupting mass that cannot be said to amount simply to the opposite of the beautiful. What the master excises is ornament: the calligraphy that enlightens the eye; the things in language that go beyond articulation; that which encumbers its flow and makes it unwieldy; that which fattens language without enriching it. All that derives from the primacy of the line and the gaze. "When writing French," says Sebilet in his Ars Poetica, "do not set down letters which you do not speak," those letters that "serve only to fill up paper."

One must return to La Deffence et illustration de la langue française, written by Joachim du Bellay in 1549, a mere ten years after the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets and the edict that came to settle the score between the subject and his filth.⁴ Reading La Deffence by way of its metaphors reveals that in both the policing of language and the politics of shit, it is a matter of uprooting oneself from that clinging "remnant of earth," that "Erdenrest" to which Goethe refers at the end of the second Faust.⁵ We might well say that the poet proposes himself as the ploughman of language, the cultivator who prunes language and transmutes it from "a savage place to a domesticated one," ridding it of waste, saving it from rot, giving it its weight in gold.
CLEAN, WELL-SPOKEN

We have known since Barthes that "when written, shit does not smell." But, to ensure that readers are spared all trace of odor, language must first purge itself of a certain lingering stink. No doubt beautiful language has more than a little to do with shit, and style itself grows more precious the more exquisitely motivated by waste. Proof of this lies in the pedantry of the countless anonymous poems found even in today’s latrines, or in the obscene syntactic contortions of those marginal literatures that elevate the excremental to a form of art.

And certainly the sign, as such, exercises a function of negation in relation to the real it designates. We thus readily agree with Adéodat when he writes that "filth in name is far nobler than the thing it signifies; we much prefer to hear it than to smell it." Nonetheless, beautiful language cannot be reduced to the clever juxtaposition of signs that keeps things at an equal and permanent distance. A certain puritanism is needed if language is to dispel odor through syntax as well as through words.

If language was to become clean, the seventeenth century could not simply rely on "pare-fumier," which was still too reodilent of the thing it signified. If "our language, once so scabrous and impolite," is to be "made elegant," cautions du Bellay, not only must it rid itself of muck and mud; its grammarians and writers must transform waste into a novel form of beauty. For du Bellay to allow himself the liberty of calling chapter 2 of La Deffence "That the French Language Cannot be Called Barbarian," language must already have labored to eliminate, or at least reduce, its own barbarous (i.e., foreign) leanings. It must already have declared
its goal of self-reflexive self-sufficiency if, within the space of only a century, Vaugelas could amend “the propriety of words and phrases” to the “purity and orderliness of style,” and thus regulate the practice of the well-spoken.

Cleansed, language corresponds to the three requirements of civilization declared by Freud: cleanliness, order, and beauty, a definition, we might add, that has absolutely nothing to say on the subject of use. To cleanse, to order, to beautify: the fact that this discursive triad manifests itself so openly in the policing of both city and speech should give us pause. Perhaps it is not filth per se that troubles history’s gaze, but the compulsion toward cleanliness that can locate its pragmatic function only after the fact.

At issue here is not whether the Edict of 1539 produced results, or if Paris, city of shit, emerged from the muck. Two and a half centuries later, Louis Sébastien Mercier painted an equally apocalyptic picture of a polis still mired in filth. Zola arrived on the scene long after positivist science had embraced modern hygiene as one of nature’s fundamental laws. But the Paris he conjured was no less a sewer than the tenebrous city described in queasy medieval accounts.

From the very outset, there is a manifest disproportion between punishment and crime in a royal edict that, after demanding that cesspools be built in every house, immediately confiscates those lacking them in merely three months time. “Hold on to your shit,” declares the monarch. “Dispose of it only in the dark of night. Remove your pigs from sight beyond the city’s walls, or I will seize your person and your goods, engulf your home in my capacious purse, and lock your body in my jail.”
PORPHYRIES

There is little likelihood that these new rulings were rigorously enforced. Indeed, judging from the architecture of numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century castles and palaces, including Fontainebleau, Saint-Cloud, and Versailles, the King was among the first infractors of his own injunction.\textsuperscript{11} I hardly mean to suggest that the esteem due a monarch might be diminished by finding him in a posture assumed by the commonest of mortals every day. But there is good reason to believe that an analysis of power should take seriously both the sight of a sovereign holding court on his pierced chair, and the splendor of the throne as a theater of resplendent love that splatters its subjects as they bow and kneel in pursuit of a royal turd.\textsuperscript{12} (This ceremony, incidentally, can be understood as a lingering residue of the ancient ritual of papal coronation in which the elected pontiff was made to sit on a pierced, porphyry throne.)

CLOACA MAXIMA

Ultimately, the actual effects of the Hygiene Edict of 1539 are less significant than the fact that it introduced a discourse whose operations took hold, if not in other places, then at least on other fronts. However, although we can trace this discourse to an origin, we cannot make it run a teleological course; for it did little more than revive historical precedents and contributed virtually nothing to the subsequent triumph of modern hygiene.

We must therefore conclude that, where its anal constituent is concerned, civilization does not follow a rhythm of linear pro-
gress. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud may have asserted "the similitude which exists between the civilizing process and the evolution of the libido in the individual." But can this thesis really be sustained? It seems that civilization’s primitive interest in excremental functions did not turn automatically into an appetite for cleanliness, order, and beauty. Otherwise, the nineteenth century’s hygienic ideal would have irreversibly developed into an obsequious, meticulous, and parsimonious anality, of which our present civilization is hardly an example.

The generations of lay teachers who lovingly inspected the ears of the Republic’s children refused to come to terms with civilization’s drive to produce new refuse while seeking its absolute elimination. One might well see their efforts as the issuance of a form of government bent on staving off the inelegance of Flaubert’s "democrassie." But the incapacity of this system to manage its own filth is lucidly betrayed by its intrepid fantasy of an elimination so complete it leaves no trace of waste.

There is something distinctly precapitalist in the inclination of the King and his poets to purify the commerce of words, to render language fluent, and to regenerate an urban circulation hindered by the accumulation of waste. This compulsive purification makes most sense when understood not as a step forward in history, but as a regression that paralleled the Renaissance’s return to the values of antiquity in other spheres.

"Humanism,” in fact, could be defined by its penchant for waste, that is, human waste. The benefits of this readily available resource were not lost on a century that revived seemingly forgotten antique customs and eagerly applied them in the cultivation of fields or the prescription of remedies, as for example in the case of..."
carbon humanun which introduced “stercorary” physicians to the medical corps. In rallying the Latin authors to its cultural renaissance and allying the enrichment of its language to Rome, the sixteenth century could hardly overlook that very pride of Rome, the cloaca maxima. If the sixteenth century did not actually revive Rome’s sewer, which, in any case, could not be matched, then at least it revived the idea of the sewer.

Cloaca maxima: even the most insipid history manual and the most elementary schooling in Latin seized every occasion to praise the cloaca maxima as 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. Civilization, at least according to Freud, follows a forked path. Impelled by an instinct to “subjugate the earth,” it fashions socially useful values and goods. But civilization is also always driven by another aim: the gain-in-pleasure, which can never be reduced to its pragmatic dimension. Waste is caught in the crossroads of these “two converging goals.” The necessary outcome of socially profitable production, it is the inevitable by-product of cleanliness, order, and beauty. But that which falls out of production must also be put to use; the gain-in-pleasure must be made to enrich civilization in a sublimated form. And thus we have not strayed far from the metaphors of those masters who sought to cleanse the language, from the King’s poets and counselors, from De Seyssel and du Bellay.
What do we produce? "Organs," responds Freud, "auxiliary organs," that, being such, secrete waste. And what if the ethical, or at least aesthetic, transformations of history were understood as waste’s precipitates? The sixteenth century never tired of "inventing" organs, principally those of sight; it harnessed the power of such auxiliaries as sail and prow to its motor organs to expand their field of action and extend the limits of their domain. As a result, Christopher Columbus could exclaim that "by means of gold even the doors of Paradise can be opened to the soul."\(^{15}\) The sixteenth century also safeguarded against the shortcomings of scribes by stockpiling memory-traces on the printed page; the printing press produced the sediment of language.

The scribe relied on superfluity to make his task as copyist bearable, by sublimating it in calligraphy and illumination. His hand momentarily stopped its movement, tracing ceased, and the letters fell: "you shall avoid all superfluous orthographies," warns Ronsard, "and you shall place no letters in words such as cannot be pronounced; at the very least you will set them down as soberly as possible until such time as there is an improved reform." The book must be "discharged" of this "corruption" which only "fills up paper."

What happened to this discharge? What have we lost, and to what end, in the elimination of this fall of letters? Out of shit, a treasure arose: the treasure of language, of King and State.

If that which is expelled inevitably returns, we must trace its circuitous path: Shit comes back and takes the place of that which is engendered by its return, but in a transfigured, incorruptible
form. Once eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold.

The losses precipitated by the printing press brought the book into the marketplace. Language’s purification increased its market share: the Edict of Villers-Cotterets did not aim to make the French language available to all. It aimed to make of it a common currency.”To enrich, to magnify, to sublimate”—such was the trajectory of a linguistic alchemy that shoots for gold.\footnote{16}

\section*{LANGUAGE IS A SLUT}

Du Bellay, who waxes botanical in chapter three of \textit{La Deffence} (”Why the French Language is not as Rich as Greek or Latin”), knew full well that he had not only feminized \textit{la langue Francoyse}, but also based his vision of decanted language on an anal metaphor:

\textit{Hence I say of our language, it is once again blossoming without bearing fruit, rather as a plant or sprout that has not yet flowered, let alone put forth all the bounty of which it is capable. Certainly not through any fault of her Nature, which is to engender along with the best, but rather, through the laxity of her caretakers. Hence, she is like that wild plant, condemned to the desert where it first began to sprout without benefit of water or pruning or protection from the brambles and thorns that have cast it into shadow, hastened its decline, and pushed it to the very brink of death. Had the ancient Romans been so neglectful of their language, it never would have grown so rich in so short a time. But, good tillers that they were, they first transplanted it from a savage place to a domesticated one; then, in}

\footnote{16}{5.8}
order that it might bear fruit, they cut its useless branches, affixing in their stead ones magisterially clipped from Greek. These new branches took such hold and so came to resemble their Latin trunk that they soon appeared not borrowed but native. From thence came to the Latin language those flowers and fruits colored with such great eloquence.\textsuperscript{17}

Language comes into its own only through an act of castration that marks it as feminine. Restored to a virginal state, it dwells in the space of the divine, the "divine order of pure bliss"\textsuperscript{18} where power reigns—the power of the One, the absolute Master to whom, for example, du Bellay bows for having "made elegant . . . our language, once scabrous and impolite." Virginal, language finds itself in the presence of the monarch who issued an edict to cleanse, to polish, to purify. The bliss of language, of style itself, partakes of the bliss of God. Language, according to du Bellay, is virgin and mother; it must be watered and pruned, fattened, but not allowed to grow old. When it fructifies, language must give birth only to itself, and the profits of its harvest must be indistinguishable from those elements by which it is sublimated and refined.

Flowing through legal channels that were essentially equivalent to all the other languages of the kingdom through which goods circulated, the golden language nonetheless remains a treasure; it remains the language of the King. For while the elimination of waste may be a condition of beauty, the beautiful does more than simply put itself in excrement’s place. Just as the pearl requires the mud that cultivates it, the language of the King—pure language of virginal power—is engendered by the base languages,
waste and commerce, to which it is the equivalent. It shines even amid the base, its splendid clarity incorruptible.

FIG. 1.10 Purified, language becomes the crown jewels, the site of law, of the sacred text, of translation and exchange. There, the muddied voices and their dialects are expurgated of their dross, losing their pitiful “remnants of earth” and the vile fruits of their dirty commerce. Guttersnipes and merchants cannot sully the virginal emblem of power, for the King’s language does not wash them of their sins. But neither does it abandon them to their sinful state. Rather, it cleanses the fruit of their common labor, elevating it to the divine place of power freed from odor. Language and gold never traffic with traders and whores. As gold and as language, both forever deny their commerce with the base.

But “treasure not only has a brute form; it also has an aesthetic one: the accumulation of fine handiwork and chiseled jewels that come with the increase of social riches.” Language too is chiseled, worked to match the transparency of the “crystal coin” in the great “social still” of circulation (Marx). Sublimated, it resembles the young girl who sells her body in exchange for the dowry that ensures virginity on her wedding night.

If the merchant was delivered from his commerce by purchasing the maidenhood, his progeny nonetheless bears the trace of tainted blood. And if commerce’s dirty little business was delivered to the site of power as lustral gold, language became the golden coin that bought the silence of the King’s subjects. Thus an abject and beastly insanity was transformed into the luminous, sonorous inanity that served to adorn the realm.19
From the golden age to the golden sun of the French monarch to the classical age, language draped herself in lamé and moved forward like a slut:

*Gold? yellow, glittering, precious Gold?*

[. . .]

*Thus much of this, will make black, white; foul, fair; Wrong, right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant; [. . .] What this, you Gods? [. . .] this is it, That makes, the wappen’d widow wed again; [. . .] Come damned earth, Thou common whore of mankind.*

20
**Figure 1.1**
Map of Paris, Venetian print, 1567.
SEF/Art Resource, New York.

**Figure 1.2**
Albumen-silver print, $7 \times 9\frac{3}{8}$".

**Figure 1.3**
"Typesetter’s Table"
*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres,*
Diderot and D’Alembert, 1779–1782.
Figure 1.4

The Louvre and the Seine viewed from Pont Neuf, 1665.
Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France.
Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 1.5

Collection of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York.

Figure 1.6

Psalter beatus page with resurrection and harrowing of Hell,
Bruges or Ghent, c. 1275.

Figure 1.7

Epistle lectionary decorated initial B,
St. Gall, Switzerland, late 9th century.
Figure 1.8

Shoeshine Sign in a Southern Town, 1936.

© Walker Evans Archive
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 1.9

Quaker steam bath, The Shocking History of Advertising.


Figure 1.10

Still photograph from the film Need, 1993.

Moyra Davey and Jason Simon.
the gold of language,
the luster of scybala
cleaning up in front of one’s house, 
heaping against the wall

Under the seal of divine power, the city—site of exchange from the earliest moments of generalized circulation—was similarly subject to purification. Whether belly or granary, the city is that place where merchandise accumulates and is consumed before being turned into gold. To purify the city, one must enrich it in a manner that makes way for the means of production. But shit cannot be converted into cash through mere elimination. Before its restitution in sublimated form, it must nourish the very cesspools of its production.

Undoubtedly, the city is embellished by street-sweeping, by being ”tidied”—just like the language of Vaugelas. However, repression was not the principal agent of its purification; rather,
notes

INTRODUCTION


2. In the late 1970s, Laporte was heavily involved with the psychoanalytic journal Ornicar? and its intellectual circle, whose prominent members included Jacques Lacan and Jean-Claude Milner.

3. Parody, for instance, is evident in the title, which pokes fun at "The History of You-Name-It" fad of the Annales school.


The urban cemetery brought the dead and the living into intolerable proximity, a perverse juxtaposition that epitomized the consistent promiscuity of city space: the cesspool in the street, the slaughterhouse in the residential neighborhood. Spaces of confinement such as prisons and hospitals, on the other hand, epitomized another form of urban pathology: density. Metaphorically, the prison substituted for the city when it came to issues of overcrowding. Together, the spatial transformation of prison and cemetery set the tone for the redefinition of the norms of urban space in the late Enlightenment: decongestion, disconnection, separation, and isolation are the imperatives of its reorganization.

CHAPTER 1


3 • Author’s emphasis.

4 • [Joachim du Bellay, French poet and theorist of language, belonged to an important group of writers active in Lyon in the sixteenth century. Following the example of Petrarch, the group employed striking metaphors and the sonnet form. Du Bellay himself was one of the first to approach the French language scientifically, as though it were a subject of natural history.—Tr.]

5 • Uns bleibt ein Erdenrest
zu tragen peinlich,
und wär’ er von Asbest,
er ist nicht reinlich.
Earth remnants molest us,
To bear them is toil,
Were they asbestos
They still would soil.


These lines are cited by Freud in the preface to Der Unratt in Sitte, Brauch, Glauben und Gewohnheitsrecht der Völker, the German translation of John G. Bourke, Scatological Rites of All Nations (Washington D.C.: W. H. Lowdermilk & Co., 1891).


8 · See Gérard Wajeman, ”Odor di Femina,” Ornicar? no. 7. [The French parfum (perfume) can be parsed to read pare/fumier or counter/manure.—Tr.]

9 · Vaugelas, Remarques sur la langue française, 1674 edition, p. 593.

10 · Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, chaps. 3 and 4.

11 · Among the many testimonies attesting to the shortage of facilities and ensuing discomfort, we select the following extravagant missive written on October 9, 1694 by Madame la duchesse d’Orléans:

Fontainbleau, October 9, 1694

To the Electress of Hanover,

You are indeed fortunate to shit whenever you may please and to do so to your heart’s content! . . . We are not so lucky here. I have to hold on to my turd un-
til evening; the houses next to the forest are not equipped with facilities. I have the misfortune of inhabiting one and consequently the displeasure of having to shit outside, which gravely perturbs me because I like to shit at my ease with my ass fully bared. Item all manner of people can see us shitting; there are men who walk by, women, girls, boys, abbeys, Swiss Guards. . . . As you can see, there is no pleasure without pain, and if we did not have to shit, I would be happy as a fish in water here at Fontainbleau. (Correspondence of Madame la duchess d’Orléans, Princesse palatine. Paris, Charpentier, 1855, vol. II, p. 385)


14 • For a tribute to the *cloaca maxima*, see H. du Roselle, *Les eaux, les égouts et les fosses d’aisances dans leurs rapports avec les épidémies*, Amiens, 1867.


16 • On the alchemical dimension of circulation, see Marx, op. cit., Book I. The equivalence of language and currency persists verbatim in the Nationalist discourse. See, for example, the informative article by Michel Debré, ”La langue française et la science universelle,” in *La Recherche*, no. 72, November 1976.


19. On the sources of this détournement, see, for the "beastly insanity," Phillipe Sollers, _H; roman_ (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973). [In this passage, Laporte is paraphrasing and riffing on Mallarmé’s "Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore."—Tr.]


CHAPTER 2


2. Author’s emphasis.


5. Cf. Pliny, _Natural History_, Book XXVII: "The authors unanimously agree that human excretions are the best possible fertilizers."

6. According to F. Liger, op. cit., who draws his sources from Cato and Varo, stercoration was not widely practiced in the Roman Republic.


8. [Model latrines, built under a pigeon coop and ventilated by means of pigeon heat and serving for the preparation of fertilizer.—Tr.]

9. Cato, _De Re Rustica_, Books II and XV.

10. According to the _Géoponiques_, the redemption by means of water was practiced by the peoples of Arabia: "When they have sufficiently dried it,