

On fatras and farts and shit: a kind of intellectual exercise

*anecdote re: fart/fatras ---- disgust/abject --- beyond the category

I came to know the fatras form during the launch of Poetry is Dead 14th issue titled Intersections, edited by Shazia Hafiz Ramji and Sheryda Warren. At this event, Ted Byrne and Donato Mancini joyously read translations of Watriquet de Couvin's fatras while the lot of us (all of whom paid for entry along with a copy of the journal. forced cultural/social purchase) joyously consumed lines riddled with farts, cut cheese, fat bellies, lost love, and home. Afterwards, when poets should be met with praise and candor, I took it upon myself to gush over Byrne and Mancini's "fart poems." Both corrected me, "fatras." I heard them the first time, "fart poems."

This is not the first time farts, as a genre, have presented themselves as a long standing link between Mancini and I. While Mancini regobbed the now considered high cultural antics of the Marquis de Sade in *120 Years of Sodom*, I redoubled my low cultural affinity for one of horror's soon to be cult classic *ABCs of Death* whereby the letter F stood not merely for "fart" but the unrequited love affair between student and teacher. "Let us pass beyond good boundaries of good taste and become one together" – teacher whimpers while student's nose plugs her asshole.

My response is not solely shits and giggles. Just as fatras poetry operated (functioned?) in protest to the King and State, so do farts and her offspring, shit. I want to take farts and shit seriously, but also want to forgo popular critical categorizes such as Julia Kristeva's "abject" or Sianne Ngai's "disgust." (Just as the Humanities forgoes "the human condition," necessary so). While these categories have been productive, drawing us "closer," Ngai would say, "to the domain of political theory, perhaps even political commitment" (*Ugly Feelings* 353-4) preparing us to act when called, these categories don't have enough of a stink to make a lasting movement. We talk about the abject – that which unsettles the social subject – and yet neglect the very features of the abject: shit, vomit, farts, decay, etc. My friend Simon Brown wrote to me a couple days ago upon hearing about my recently fart exploits: "Yeah, it's easy to talk about the abject when you don't directly have to mention slimy diarrhea or vomit on the walls or wherever it happens be." Herein lies the beauty of fatras – the poems mostly attune us these features. They start with the asshole and then we're left to impose a conceptual framing, a way to read/understand/know the poem. But the poem just farts at us. It farts in our general direction.

* what is a fart and when do farts appear in fatras?

Lady of perfect beauty
I love you quite perfectly
"Lady of perfect beauty"

said a counterfeit sow
 “You’ll kiss my fundament
 that’s how you lost your clothes
 because an old ruined house
 brought the news back to me
 for which a mare’s dark excuse
 fighting a rooster drew up
 to steel his soul said surely
 “Fart just once with your throat
 I’ll love you quite perfectly”

A fart is the air that comes out of an anus; the air is produced by digestion. Poem 23, however, ends with a request that the perfect beauty’s fart come from her perfect throat: “Fart just once with your throat / I’ll love you quite perfectly.” A fart is caused by the internal buildup of gases that are formed during the process of digestion and respiration. The action of breathing with an open throat means breathing with the muscles of the throat relaxed, unencumbered by any blockages. The poem asks the perfect beauty not only to fart from her throat, but, broadly speaking, to make noise; perfectly smelly noise. This is real love. A mostly healthy person might pass gas 14-18 times per day, sometimes not even realize it because the farts are mostly silent and odourless. The smelliness of the fart, reports say, is the real problem. We begin to doubt real love. We live limited by the expectations imposed upon us by the couple-form whereby this caliber of noise, a stinky perfect fart, is to be avoided at all costs or it will cost you love. In an episode of *Sex and the City* titled “The Drought,” Carrie feels comfortable sleeping and spooning with Mr. Big, yet mortified when she cuts the cheese in bed (a subpar toot if you ask me), and is really worried when his once rampant sexual desires for her wanes. It really hits her when he prefers to watch a boxing match to kissing, so she paints her apartment. The couple-form still demands we be the perfect social subject for our husbands and wives. It causes our guts to recoil and shit our perfect sheets.

* **fart/shit**

The profanity that embodies each fatras is a gesture of protest against the King and State, uncoupling language from the ideological structures that dictate intentions and motivations. Now the English word “fart,” like the French word “péter,” is one of the oldest words in the English lexicon. The word “shit” comes from the words “skit” and “skheid.” Related to the verb “to shed,” it means “to split, divide, separate.” A fart is a reminder that we will soon shit and make a mess that we will soon have to clean up. It can be a relief to clean up our mess just as much as it is to fart and shit. Yet, I start to wonder, where does such relief, on both ends, come from? I had

to vigorously clean my and Maria Wallstam's apartment in order to even sit down to write this response. I had to scrub dust off shelves and any residual shit from our collective toilet bowl in order to think clearly about farts and shit.

At this point, I'm concerned about conflating shit and farts. Less so farts and fatras. And also conscious the French translation of fart is péter, which is more closely aligned with the English word "gas" and, of course, "petrol." Nevertheless, let's continue to digest and make a movement together. I'm reminded of Mancini declaring once how disinterested he was in anyone's "polished turd" and Avital Ronnell's sound suggestion to graduate students "everything you hand in is your own caca." I present to you my caca.

* Laporte/civilizing language

I'm indebted to Simon Brown for bringing Dominique LaPorte's *The History of Shit* to my attention. In this text, LaPorte-a-potty speaks to the historical context in which fatras have been produced, declaring how the history of shit is also the history of subjectivity. For LaPorte, shit is not a symbol of potential shame or disgust, but instead a symbol of explosive protest against rationalism and idealism. 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. He writes, "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" (pp). "Hold on to your shit," declares the King. "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." The King, like the Emperor, wears no clothes to which the court admires for its fine stitch and embroidery. The King, unlike the Proletariat, does not fart nor shit. Following LaPorte's logic, the King is "lucidly betrayed by [his] intrepid fantasy of an elimination so complete it leave no trace of waste" (pp). LaPorte specifically aligns advancements in septic technologies with similar measurements and tactics used to eliminate the French language, privatizing and domesticating the communal act of shitting along with the communal act of discourse. LaPorte continues, "for its subjects to participate in the body of the empire, their waste need not be subjected to microscopic scrutiny. The patrolling and controlling of orifices are sufficient strategies. It is enough to enforce a code of shitting—the master's code, the code of he who knows; namely, he who knows how to hold it in." "All liquids," says Article 4 of the Edict of 1539, "even thick ones, must be made to circulate" (pp.)

Ryan Fitzpatrick 1/10/17 7:18 PM

Comment: Check out *Garbage in the Cities* by Martin Melosi, which historicizes waste removal as a specifically modernist project.

Fatras, however, do not know and will not hold it in. The King needs an enema and these poems just squirted.

We cannot digest nor shit without some kind of sustenance. In Poem 12 we hear reference to a “pear,” “drink,” “fasting,” and “ass.”

“Friend, if you would like a drink”
 said the sire of an anecdote
 “It’s time for you to divine
 if my dear needs to cut the cheese
 and to taint the very pear
 I ate for breakfast last night
 so a dog’s trampled carcass
 will make St. John believe in her
 and say: ‘If you’re not fasting,
 Sir, here’s my ass – on recess! –
 I beg you to dive right in”

“If you’re not fasting ... here’s my ass ... dive right in” AKA eat my ass. LaPorte writes that “While business is conducted, the State looks elsewhere; it is disinclined to dirty itself with either the blood of Christ or the shit of commerce.” But not you, dear revolutionary, you are hungry, yes, but not fasting. Your hunger is not by choice, but forced upon you by the State, which leaves your plate bare and your glass empty. And, yet, the poem does shame the dear who farts by reminding that the need “to cut the cheese” does indeed taint the sustenance, the pear, the poet ate for dinner. Don’t believe the lies of poets most of all than the Kings. While you’re up the poet’s ass, perhaps you’ll steal a sneaky peak at the beginnings of his bullshit. The fart is the sign of shit. The fart is the precursor to a full-throttle, violent revolutionary movement. If we were to think dialectically on the matter at hand, a shart (when you fart and a little bit of shit comes out) would be the third thing we’re missing and must consider. It slows things down a bit, but I may just be making reference to this for fear of making a revolutionary/theoretical mess too soon. Maybe just a little bit should come out first. Ten minutes worth is what we were given. This response is a lackluster shart.

The civilizing forces that surround fatras also subjugate the earth and bodies not fit to be civilized. Such civilizing forces seek to cleanse the language of the poet. It wants to wash the poet’s mouth out with lye and turpentine. The poet willingly opens his mouth and works for it. Such civilizing forces want to fatten up language, like it does the poet, without enriching it. Shit on its face and tell it that you love it. “Cleanliness has its price,” reminds LaPorte, “or, rather, the right to be free of odour is not without its costs” (pp.).

Ryan Fitzpatrick 1/10/17 7:23 PM

Comment: Part of me wants you to push this dialectical synthesis further for laffs

none of these poems smell. fart-in

Could Watriquet de Couvin bring these poems anywhere other than the courts? Could he bring them to the barricades in protest of war? Shit ceases to be shit once it has been collected and transmuted, and only exists in the form of symbolic equivalents. Are these absurdist poems not as beautiful as they are shitty? If poems are beautiful it is because the poet bathes them – cleans shit lines, sweeps orphans, polices the language, and expurgates speech acts to ensure an ordered sequence, even when rearranged, reordered, such as the fatras. If the fatras is a fart poem then why can't I smell anything? When I giggled as Byrne uttered the word "fart" did I fear it pollute my mouth? Does the giggle defuse it's revolutionary potential? Does it take it any less seriously when serenaded by way of a giggle fit? I think not. "When written," Roland Barthes reminds, "shit does not smell." And neither do these poems. To ensure that readers are spared all trace of odour, language must first purge itself of a certain lingering stink. My other good friend Ryan Fitzpatrick supplies me with the following questions: "Can language have that stink in the first place? Alternatively, does language have to find a way to stick to bodies/material before it can have a stink?"

Ryan Fitzpatrick 1/10/17 7:43 PM

Comment: Can language have that stink in the first place? Alternately, does language have to find a way to stick to bodies/material before it can have a stink?

I did a dirty librarian search and Googled: which politician has the worst gas? Surprise! It's Stephen Harper! The headline reads, "By trying to protect and promote the oil sector, the Harper government effectively shackled Canada's pipelines in purgatory." Another dirty librarian search brings me to the Bernie Bros' infamous "fart-in" once it was determined Hillary Clinton received the DNC nomination in 2016. The article reads: "The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign are preparing to create a shantytown in one of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods, where they say they plan to eat beans and other gas-inducing foods before they head to the convention hall on July 28 to, well, "make a stink." Another dirty librarian search brings me to Trump's golden toilet and then how Freud had an idea that in the unconscious mind, that money and perhaps gold in particular, was equivalent to some kind of shit. Excremental substance.

Ryan Fitzpatrick 1/10/17 7:45 PM

Comment: Cue that scene from Blazing Saddles

I suppose I want to end by stating that fatras could never be taken to the barricades then and we definitely cannot expect our poems, in whatever form, to do the trick, not without a line of bare, fearless, farting and shitting asses. Like taking in your lover's farts be a sign of perfect love, so to be a shitting asshole the most perfect arsenal against a King and his golden toilet bowl or his revolutionary long board.

But I actually want to end by quoting with all my heart a relative who just so happened to text me with the following: I farted and thought of you.