

I URINE, MANURE, BLOOD, SPERM

THE LIVED FOUNDATIONS OF PROPERTY RIGHT

TIGERS PISS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR LAIR. And so do lions and dogs. Like those carnivorous mammals, many animals, our cousins, *mark* their territory with their harsh, stinking urine or with their howling, while others such as finches and nightingales use sweet songs.

To mark: the origin of this verb is the mark of a footstep left on the soil. In bygone days, the story goes, the whores of Alexandria used to carve their initials in reverse order on the soles of their sandals. This enabled prospective clients to read the imprints on the sand and discover both the desired person and the direction of her bed. The presidents of great brands promoted by advertisers on city billboards today would no doubt enjoy knowing that like good sons they are direct descendants of those whores.

Or perhaps they descend from creatures that mark the boundaries of their territory with their excrements.

Similarly, certain plants throw out little invisible jets of acid . . . nothing grows in the frigid shadow of fir trees.

**THE CLEAN AND THE DIRTY:
ANIMAL CUSTOMS, HUMAN CUSTOMS**

How do the living inhabit a place? How do they establish it, recognize it? Lions through smell, birds by hearing . . . advertisers and whores by sight. Here we have three senses on the alert. How do animals create links as powerful as the law is for humans, links that enable them to appropriate the habitat where they dwell and live?

The science of animal behavior, ethology, describes at length those nests, holes, wallows, sheds, ecological niches . . . in short, how males define and defend their habitats with their filth. These places are often secret, hidden, dark, buried, lost, places where the living eat, sleep, hibernate, copulate, give birth, and are born, in short survive; do they own or rent these places? How can we answer this question, which is perhaps a bit too anthropomorphic? We can easily turn it around.

In *The Parasite*, I described the customs of mammals in order to compare them to hominine ways of appropriation. Whoever spits in the soup keeps it; no one will touch the salad or the cheese polluted in this way. To make something its own, the body knows how to leave some personal stain: sweat on a garment, saliva or feet

put into a dish, waste in space, aroma, perfume, or excrement, all of them rather hard things . . . but also my name, printed in black on this book cover, where my signature looks sweet and innocent, seemingly unrelated to those habits. And yet . . . Hence the theorem of what might be called natural right. By “natural” I mean the general behavior of living species: *appropriation takes place through dirt*. More precisely, what is properly one’s own is dirt.

The spit soils the soup, the logo the object, the signature the page: *property, propriety, or cleanliness*. The same word tells of the same struggle; in French, it has the same origin and the same meaning.¹ Property is marked, just as the step leaves its imprint. Conversely, I should re-mark—yes!—that a hotel makes the rooms clean and proper to make them available for others. Otherwise, no one would come. Conversely, clean and proper here implies there is no well-defined owner yet, and that it is freely accessible. In short, either proper means appropriated and consequently dirty or proper implies really

1. Professor Serres plays on the various meanings of the French *propre*, which means both “clean” and “one’s own,” or “characteristic of.” The French title *Le Mal propre* is itself a pun on several levels: *mal* is evil, combined with *propre*; it thus signifies “clean evil,” but *malpropre* in one word also means dishonest, sleazy, despicable. I have chosen to emphasize the combination of evil and dishonest by translating the title as “Malfeasance,” which has similar connotations. [All notes are from translator.]

neat and therefore without an owner. Come over here, to this clean spot, you may, because it obviously welcomes you. When you leave, it will be yours because you will have made it dirty. No one will want to sleep in your sheets, nor handle your used towel, nor drink from your glass seeded with bacteria from the imprint of your lips. You appreciate the cleaning done in a hotel. The cleaner it looks, the more hospitable it will seem to everyone. At home, I take care of the garbage and occupy a space called by the delightful name of powder room. Long ago, we hardly dared to translate the famous quote *stercus suum cuique bene olet*,² “one’s own excrement smells good.” This is still true of noise, one’s own noise is not bothersome. This is also true of many types of trash. It is again true of small children who have similar behaviors at the anal stage.

THE EXPROPRIATED SQUAT

Discreetly, dictionaries define *squatter*, as the term indicates, as someone who occupies the surface of the land on which he crouches. This would take up little space; only a dwarf could lie down on such a spot. No, squatting describes the crouching posture of defecation and that of females when they piss or give birth.

2. Latin proverb, provenance uncertain, quoted by Michel de Montaigne, in *Essais*, III, VIII.