



The Exquisite Corpse

BOOK SERIES

Publishing works from both emerging and established scholars, The Exquisite Corpse book series challenges readers with questions that are often left unasked about the human body. Like the Surrealist's parlour game, for which the series is named, these books present the body in all of its unruly and corporeal glory. *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* is the first book in this series.

For more information, please contact:

Karen May Clark, Acquisitions Editor

University of Regina Press

3737 Wascana Parkway

Regina SK S4S 0A2

Canada

PHONE: 306-585-4664

EMAIL: karen.clark@uregina.ca

*Reading from Behind

A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE ANUS

Jonathan A. Allan



University of Regina Press

© 2016 Jonathan A. Allan

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means — graphic, electronic, or mechanical — without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping or placement in information storage and retrieval systems of any sort shall be directed in writing to Access Copyright.

Printed and bound in Canada at Friesens.

Cover and text design: Duncan Campbell, University of Regina Press

Copy editor: Dallas Harrison

Proofreader: Kristine Douaud

Index: Patricia Furdek

NOTE: Every possible effort has been made to contact copyright holders. Any copyright holders who could not be reached are urged to contact the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Allan, Jonathan A., author

Reading from behind : a cultural analysis of the anus / Jonathan A. Allan.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-88977-384-4 (bound).—ISBN 978-0-88977-389-9 (html).

—ISBN 978-0-88977-388-2 (pdf)

1. Anus—Social aspects. 2. Anus. 3. Buttocks—Social aspects.
4. Buttocks. 5. Sex in popular culture. 6. Anus (Psychology). I. Title.

GN298.A55 2016 306.4 C2016-900158-X C2016-900159-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



U O F R PRESS

University of Regina Press, University of Regina

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, S4S 0A2

TEL: (306) 585-4758 FAX: (306) 585-4699

WEB: www.uofrpress.ca

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. / Nous remercions l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada. This publication was made possible through Creative Saskatchewan's Creative Industries Production Grant Program.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Canada

creative
SASKATCHEWAN

*Contents

Acknowledgements—vii

Introduction

No Wrong Doors: An Entryway—i

CHAPTER 1 Anal Theory, or Reading from Behind—23

CHAPTER 2 Orienting Virginity—49

CHAPTER 3 Topping from the Bottom:
Anne Tenino's *Frat Boy and Topy*—63

CHAPTER 4 Orienting *Brokeback Mountain*—81

CHAPTER 5 Spanking Colonialism—111

CHAPTER 6 Unlocking Delmira Agustini's "El Intruso"—129

CHAPTER 7 Shameful Matrophilia
in *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*—147

CHAPTER 8 Vengeful Vidal—169

Notes—189

References—223

Index—241

Acknowledgements



READING FROM BEHIND IS A BOOK THAT I NEVER SET out to write but was written in large part thanks to peer reviewers who encouraged me to turn an article into a book. As such, from the outset, let me thank David William Foster for encouraging me to turn that article into this book—in many ways, this book could not have happened without his input, queries, comments, and provocations.

I also wish to thank a range of colleagues at Brandon University—for I truly work at one of the most collegial places—who commented on the manuscript, engaged with me, sent me articles, and above all encouraged me: Emily Holland, Corinne Mason, Allison McCulloch, Doug Ramsey, Serena Petrella, David Winter, and Emma Varley. I also wish to thank Brandon University, my institutional home, for supporting my sometimes curious research. I am especially thankful to the late Carol Steele, the Interlibrary Loan Office, and the entire staff of the Brandon University Library for ordering books and articles that helped to facilitate this research. And thanks to my research assistant, Morganna Malyon, for tracking down sources and proofreading.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Beyond Brandon University, I am especially thankful to all my colleagues in Meeting with Your Writing, facilitated by Jo Van Every. Further still, my thanks to Jeannine Pitas (who also translated the poetry), Brendon Wocke, Frank Karioris, Antonio Viselli, Jesse Carlson, Ricky Varghese, Cristina Santos, Rachel Stapleton, Lukasz Wodzynski, and so many others who read and commented on various parts of the manuscript. And thank you to the anonymous peer reviewers; I am grateful for your kind, careful, and inquisitive readings of this text.

As well, I am thankful to audiences at various conferences who listened and responded to early iterations of these chapters, notably the Department of English at Princeton University, which invited me to speak as I was putting together the final edits, but also the Faculty of Arts Speaker Series at Brandon University (organized by Derek Brown and Allison McCulloch), the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, the Canadian Association of Hispanists, the Sexuality Studies Association, the Red River Women's Studies Conference, the American Men's Studies Association, and others.

The original article that inspired this book was published in *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* 43: 2 (2014), and is included, with permission (and revisions), as Chapter 6, "Unlocking Delmira Agustini's 'El Intruso.'" I also want to thank Kent Monkman for permission to include images of two of his paintings in Chapter 5. I also thank Jeannine Pitas for her careful translations of the poetry.

I would be remiss if I failed to note the support of the University of Regina Press, excited about this project from the outset. Bruce Walsh, Director and Publisher, responded to my initial email with interest and generosity, and Karen Clark, Acquisitions Editor, has guided me throughout the entire process, putting up with my numerous questions and offering advice and ideas along the way. Dallas Harrison has been the ideal copy editor, carefully working through each and every sentence, always with a keen eye to find a better way to say something.

On the home front, I am thankful to my family, who encouraged me to keep on writing, even when the writing wasn't happening. And, of course, my gratitude and love goes to Deanna, who has tried, as much as possible, to relieve all of my anxieties about this book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program, for which I am immensely grateful, and I wish to extend sincere thanks to the Canadian government and Canadian taxpayers for supporting the Canada Research Chairs Program. Additionally, I received funding from the Brandon University Research Committee.

INTRODUCTION

No Wrong Doors: An Entryway

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. —J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *The Hobbit*



READING FROM BEHIND IS A SHORT BOOK ON THE ROLE of the anus, the rear, the posterior, the behind, the bottom, the ass in literary theory and cultural criticism. I have a basic hunch that the ass is more important than we have cared to admit, or than we have admitted, but only in part. I will argue that the rear can help us to understand a wide range of textual expressions and that “reading from behind” can illuminate literary and cultural texts in new and exciting ways. However, to do this, we must change our critical postures and anxieties and address what is arguably the most pressing issue: our discomfort with anal things, with other people’s asses, and with the fact that perhaps the ass is filled with meaning that we have not yet attended to for any number of reasons. It’s tricky, for despite the apparent discomfort with, and avoidance of, the anus, it fascinates us. In fact, Christina Garibaldi boldly writes for *MTV News*, “It’s pretty safe to say that

2014 will be remembered as the year of the booty.”; Jennifer Lopez gleefully responds that “It’s about time. . . . Before we were just considered like heavy, like we weren’t ‘in shape’ or whatever if you had a big butt or something. So now it’s kind of nice that people are embracing womanly curves in that way.”¹ The ass is everywhere it seems, yet, as Lopez reminds us, “It’s about time” that we look at it.

It truly is everywhere, the ass. Consider just a few of the many examples in recent popular culture: the song “Honky Tonk Badonkadonk”; the iconic behinds of Kim Kardashian and, as noted above, Jennifer Lopez; the twerking booty of Miley Cyrus. Farther abroad is Pippa Middleton’s famous “derriere,” which inspired a “new plastic surgery trend” known as the “Pippa butt lift,” as reported by the *International Business Times*.² “Fat Bottomed Girls” indeed. Paying attention to a television show such as *The Big Bang Theory* reveals a significant amount of anal humour, ranging from phrases such as “anal autograph” to “colon calling card,” both appearing in a single episode.³ And to take a longer view of culture, to turn to words, we have the saying “Don’t be an ass” and the fine word *asshole*, which itself became the subject of philosopher Aaron James’s 2012 book *Assholes: A Theory*—a defining and hermeneutic work less about the thing itself and more about the kind of person that one might angrily call an asshole (incidentally, he dedicates the book to his parents).

With only these few examples given but so many available to offer, it seems fair to say that the ass captivates us. And though some might insist that these popular cultural references are simply oddities or passing fads and curiosities, I believe that we need to think deeper about their meanings and how we respond to them. So many of these ideas of the behind, the ways in which we speak and don’t speak about the ass, fold into one another, leading me to conclude that the anus is a governing symbol that can and does explain a wide range of phenomena but that we have—for many reasons that run the gamut from the taboo, to the fear of embarrassment, to the practical question of “Who’d fund this research project?”—until now left largely untouched and unread.

I am interested here in why the anus remains covered, hidden away, a site of humiliation and disgust, even though we seem to

see the fascination with it everywhere, from popular music to royal weddings. Interesting too is that, while we have had for a long time theories and discussions of the phallus in particular, but also the womb and clitoris, we do not yet have what might be called an “anal theory” or a “methodology of the anus”—a way to read from behind. This book sets out to overturn this failing—to turn theory on its head by asking different questions, using other modes of reading, of thinking, and of critiquing. What would happen, for instance, if we uncovered and revealed the anus and anal dimensions—tunnels, holes, crevices, enemas—in literary, filmic, and visual texts?

I attempt to answer these questions by working through a series of literary and visual materials, some from “high” culture, others from “low” culture, all of which, in one fashion or another, afford a commentary on the anal dimensions of the text. I explore, for example, what it means to think about the writings of Gore Vidal, Annie Proulx, and the popular romance novelist in a way that considers how they represent anal sex. Via close readings, I consider too the result of seriously questioning why the curvaceous butt appears as fascinating, ready to be spanked, pinched, and teased, and why cultural critics have failed to ask this question. And what happens when the anus is freed from its association with male homosexuality? Although male homosexuality has some claim to the anus, what results in considering it *apart* from male homosexuality? What happens when we see the anus as *more* than male homosexuality?

Reading from Behind thus participates and intervenes in a series of discussions ranging from masculinity studies, to queer theory, to literary and cultural analysis. I dwell on the anus, its meanings and signs, in order to deflate, critique, and expand our understandings of it. We shall come to see, by the book’s end, that it is a remarkably complex organ, sign, and symbol that appears repeatedly in literature and culture.



WITH RESPECT TO THE ANUS, “The prevailing social consensus,” writes sexologist and therapist Jack Morin, “can still be described as, ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell.’”⁴ Reading this assertion, published in 2010, I

am struck by how much one thing has changed—the resonance of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” Yet so much has also not changed. As much as gays and lesbians might not be forced any longer into the closet, the anus—and discussions of it—continue to remain guarded, closeted, limited.⁵ We are still anxious about it. It remains taboo. As I began to think about writing *Reading from Behind*, I realized early on in the venture that Morin’s words would ring true for many readers, and I imagine that they will remain true for a long time to come. No doubt conversation about it evokes discomfort for many. It is, after all, central to elimination, shit, the abject. But it also entails eroticism, pleasure, affect, sexuality. Still, it makes people extremely uncomfortable, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in academic conferences, during the scholarly peer review process, and the like. So, though it is certainly true that postmodern scholars and their philosophies have allowed scholars in general to ask many new questions, other questions still remain unasked, let alone answered. So as much as the anus might well be a valuable area of inquiry, the discomfort persists, the giggles continue, and the dirtiness of the subject matter continues to taint those involved.

Indeed, the more I spoke about these issues at conferences, the more I paid attention to audiences’ reactions, the initial uneasiness yet also the curiosity (often what brought people to the lecture), and the kinds of questions asked. Even today I must admit my own embarrassment at times. There was the uncomfortable experience, for example, when an American border agent read my conference paper on “Rectal Reading” in its entirety, presumably because it was a threat to national security (or maybe because it was during a government shutdown and—being a particularly slow and boring time, like constipation itself—the guard had nothing better to do). As I have thought about these experiences evoked by my research and writing, I have become more and more convinced that “most of us still feel somewhat uneasy”⁶ with this subject matter. But what causes this uneasiness? Why are we, or at least so many of us, uncomfortable with discussions of the anus?

There is, it must be admitted, “no simple explanation”⁷ for any of these issues, and though I might be tempted to try to resolve these problems, tensions, and discomforts I think that it is more

productive to dwell on them. Taboos, we might recall, “have an all-encompassing quality” and are “highly resistant to logic [and] scientific inquiry”; the taboo is always a “product of culture.”⁸ It is certain that we have a number of ideas about the anus and anal things that constitute what I call “anal mythologies.” I mean by mythologies what Roland Barthes meant by them: not so much the lofty myths of Zeus and Aphrodite but the practical, daily myths of wine and milk, steak-frites, and astrology. That is, I am interested in the kinds of myths that inform day-to-day life, the stories that we tell about, say, astrology. The ass too is present in popular culture, a quotidian myth informing common-sense ideas and ideals. For example, a “fat ass” can be a desirable thing—“I like big butts,” the song declares. But it can also be derogatory, fat-phobic, and implicated in gendered and racialized thought (e.g., Hottentot Venus). An “asshole,” though a very useful thing, is not something that we wish to be called, yet we do not wish to be without one. People can be “anal,” which is not to say that they are assholes but that they have anal tendencies, such as cleanliness. Being anal bears no relation to being gay, though in popular culture gay men often appear as anal—think of Will in *Will and Grace* or Mitch in *Modern Family*. And even though being anal is not essential to being gay, the anus seems to be, as Jeffrey R. Guss has put it, “the very ground zero of gayness.”⁹ In this rendering, any man who experiences anal pleasure, especially his own anal pleasure, becomes associated with gayness, and herein lies the rub: when it comes to the anus, a great deal of phobia resides within and around it.

My argument in *Reading from Behind* is that the anus is a remarkably productive and meaningful site of inquiry. The anus, unlike the vagina or the vulva, for instance, is not always the opposite or inverse of the penis, yet it would be difficult to argue that the anus is not rich in meaning. Although the penis is undoubtedly fascinating insofar as it highlights many anxieties, desires, and fears, and though its symbolic form could certainly be the governing figure in an attempt to outline a history of sexuality (as a critic such as Ilan Stavans has argued), I argue that the anus provides an equally provocative site to begin critical analysis. I also ask questions about the nature of literary and cultural criticism, not because I believe

these modes of criticism to be in need of revision or correction but because I am committed to opening up new lines of inquiry or repressed lines of inquiry that have hitherto remained largely uninvestigated—sealed tight, so to speak.

Indeed, readings of the texts that I explore in *Reading from Behind* have been incomplete because critics have failed to account for the anus. The anus is an opening to the text that has remained obscured by critical, intellectual, and affective anxieties that have not permitted readers the chance to engage with the other side of textuality. Thus, I argue that though a poem such as Delmira Agustini's "El Intruso" is largely obvious in its meaning—an intruder enters a private space, and an erotic encounter ensues—there is a secondary meaning, another way of reading the text, that demonstrates a complexity that has not been critically imagined. It is this critical work, as a kind of imaginative reading, that motivates *Reading from Behind*. I intend to explore and consider what happens to gender, particularly masculinity, when the anus is incorporated into textual analysis.

Jonathan Branfman and Susan Ekberg Stiritz use this type of questioning to frame their article "Teaching Men's Anal Pleasure: Challenging Gender Norms with 'Prostage' Education." What would it mean, they ask, to think carefully and critically about the intersection of masculinity and anality? They provide an analysis of a letter sent to Dan Savage, the popular sex columnist:

"Drew" anxiously describes his new found "fetish": anal pleasure. Drew, a 30-year-old, recently "let a girlfriend 'experiment' on my ass. What started out as a kink with her finger has turned into a full-blown fetish with her dildo." Interpreting this "fetish" as a sign he might be gay, Drew "tried masturbating to some gay porn." Although the porn did not excite him, Drew seeks assurance that he can really be straight despite enjoying receptive anal penetration. As he puts it, "I still don't have any desire to be with a man sexually, Dan, but I LOVE having my ass pounded. Does that tip the scale toward homo?"¹⁰

Drew has become a “frantic epistemologist,” to use the language of Adam Phillips.¹¹ He is urgently trying to figure out what this newfound “fetish” means—as if it *must* mean something. He turns to gay pornography to see if he really is gay; ultimately, he remains uncertain and requires answers to his anxious questions. He turns to Savage and asks, “Does that tip the scale toward homo?” Surely, in practical terms, Drew must be aware of who is giving him this pleasure: a girlfriend. The scene, in basic terms, is heterosexual insofar as it involves a male body and a female body. Indeed, this is the response from Savage: “Once again: If a man and a woman are doing it—whatever it is—it’s a heterosexual act.”¹² (To be certain, he is correct on the one hand, but on the other he reduces sexuality to a body with a penis and another body with a vagina. It is too reductive; it does not account for the complexities of gender, sexuality, and sex.)

Incidentally, but importantly, an issue that goes entirely untouched in the sexual advice from Savage is the danger of using a sex toy that might not be designed for anal pleasure. The *Archive of Sexual Behaviour* reports, for instance, that “a healthy, 28-year-old man presented to Emergency Services at our hospital because 5 h ago, while he practiced sex with his girlfriend, she introduced a sexual toy (vibrator) across the anal orifice. Due to suction the object stayed in the rectum.”¹³ Such narratives are all too common if one consults medical journals, and on the Internet one can find numerous stories such as this involving any number of instruments: vegetables, toys, guns.

The issue here is that medical professionals, sexologists, and scholars of gender and sexuality need to do a better job of educating the public about anal sexual health. The average male, it seems, is evidently curious about, if not interested in, anal pleasure, not least because of the elusive “male G spot,” highlighted in various examples from popular culture to sex tips from gay men for straight women. Indeed, it is not surprising that renowned psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer wrote in 1966 that “I have been forced also to the recognition that masturbation of the anus is a far more widespread habit than analytical literature to date would imply.”¹⁴ Although his article was published decades ago, it seems that concerns remain

as “widespread” today as they were then. If this is the case, then surely there is a responsibility to think carefully about anal health and to treat it as seriously as we would any other medical concern. As a policy initiative (not the goal of this book), this would be not about sexual orientation but about anal health and sexual health. Although not wanting to take on the role of a concerned sexologist, I believe that this discussion of the anus needs to include the work of a cultural critic, such as me, working alongside sexologists, medical practitioners, and sex therapists.

The challenge with Drew’s story is that it recalls Guss’s contention that the anus has become “the very ground zero of gayness.” Drew becomes a “frantic epistemologist” not of what the anus means for other people but of what it means for him. It confuses him. He is like the Lacanian hysteric asking, “Am I a man or a woman?”¹⁵ However, his question is less about sex and more about sexuality: Am I straight or gay? Hetero or homo? And the answer it seems, at least for Drew, is found in and through the anus: what it does and what it means to the constitution and essence of sexuality.

The anus, in this rendering, works to define one’s sexuality. The problem therefore resides in the fact that “the ultimate ‘feminine’ that men must reject in order to be regarded or to regard themselves as masculine” is penetrated.¹⁶ Such a perspective, however, does not (for it cannot) “celebrate our own complex, ambiguous bodily sensations.”¹⁷ In a sense, *Reading from Behind* proposes that the anus is “complex, ambiguous,” and this is what we need to recognize in our critical theories; and we must equally admit that the anus seems to be caught up in a grand narrative: “the very ground zero of gayness.” This tension needs to be exposed, explored, and understood. The anus, as we have witnessed briefly here, calls into question masculinity, sexuality, and orientation. Even in a scenario involving a male and a female, the anus seems to disrupt one’s claim to a given sexuality and by extension one’s gender.

One of the challenges that must be overcome while “reading from behind” is the less than critical imperative that we orient the anus in a particular fashion. Indeed, one of the goals of this study is to decentre the orientation of the anus. This is not to deny that it has an orientation but to claim that its orientation is not the same

for everyone. Further, what would happen—if only as a thought experiment—if we privileged the anal dimensions of texts? Can we read for these instances, these moments, and imagine other readings not indebted to a particular orientation or to the obvious prominence of the phallus, a site of difference, and move toward a space of inclusion? What if the ass, the booty, the moneymaker, the *tukhus* were a fully loaded sign endowed with rich and complex meaning much like the numerous nerve endings of the anus? What if we loosened up our critical inquiries, embraced the pleasure of the text, and removed ourselves from the paranoid, sphincter-tightening hermeneutics of suspicion? Indeed, is it possible to find a way to read texts that engage the anus but not fall victim to a hermeneutics of suspicion, a paranoid, anxious, or nervous reading practice, one that always insists on a certain orientation?

I suggest that the solution, as it were, is to take the anus head on, to read from behind. Instead of keeping the anus covered and controlled, we can explore why it matters and how it functions in a given text. We can undertake new readings of works that afford interesting, provocative, and important critiques of how we think about the anus. It is not a matter of displacing the phallus from literary and cultural analysis—or of forgetting the womb and clitoris altogether—but a matter of looking at the other pieces, the other assemblages, and determining if there is not another mode of reading that affords another perspective on the same texts.



TO THESE ENDS, I DRAW on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” one of her most provocative and challenging essays. Throughout it, Sedgwick challenges “the hypervigilance of the hermeneutics of suspicion—or what she called, following Melanie Klein, the paranoid position—which had become ‘nearly synonymous with criticism itself.’”¹⁸ Instead of paranoid reading, Sedgwick imagines “reparative reading” as a mode of critical theory that embraces the “privilege of unknowing”¹⁹ and that provides theorists, readers, and scholars

with a way to think about texts that does not always already, even before reading, imagine a potential outcome—a possible reading, indeed, that does not imagine a *potential* as even *necessary*.

Reparative reading embraces the possibility of any number of readings, some of which might be predictable, and others of which might catch us by surprise. Admittedly, all readings have the influence of the reader, and a reader attuned to a given politics or poetics will likely find these meanings in texts. All of the readings in this book, for instance, attend to anal poetics, but I want to stress that I am not foreclosing any other potential reading. My intention is to ask what happens when we do not focus on the governing symbol, the mainstream reading informed by the phallus, and so on. Reparative readers, on the other hand, do not privilege this “paranoid position” and instead “seek new environments of sensation for the objects they study by displacing critical attachments once forced by correction, rejection, and anger with those crafted by affection, gratitude, solidarity, and love.”²⁰

My argument is that it is important to remove ourselves from, or at least temper, what I see as a paranoid, sphincter-tightening perspective with respect to the anus, its symbolism, and its affects. It is equally imperative, however, that we understand how this paranoia unfolds in Sedgwick’s work and how we can work with her invocation of reparative reading or what we might now call reading from behind. Reading from behind, as I hope becomes clear throughout this book, works to diminish, if not negate, the seemingly unquestioned authority of paranoid (critical) reading, but to do so a radical reorientation of the anus and its role in the collective imaginary is required. That is, we must admit, no easy feat. This book works to relieve the burden of paranoia.

For Sedgwick, reading from a reparative position is about “surrender[ing] the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*” and that, “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.”²¹ However, as Sedgwick has noted about reparative reading, once “reparative motives . . . become explicit, [they] are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure (‘merely aesthetic’) and