

The Anti-Chamber

baedan

2014

There where it smells of shit
it smells of being.
Man could just as well not have shat,
not have opened the anal pouch,
but he chose to shit
as he would have chosen to live
instead of consenting to live dead.
Because in order not to make caca,
he would have had to consent
not to be,
but he could not make up his mind to
lose being,
that is, to die alive.

~ Antonin Artaud

To Have Done With the Judgment of god

Of where one shits, one shall not speak—to this oath is the whole of civilization held. From chamber pots to those euphemistically-named rooms whose real function has little to do with washing or bathing but is instead to *flush away* those shameful signs of human animality, there has ever been in the civilized management of feces a palpable sense of *fear*. The terror manifest in the porcelain pots and thrones betrays a concern far deeper than sanitation and public health, properly understood. After all, it is no accident that with the pressing of humanity into the city arises the threat of mass disease. If the management of food and consumption makes a civilization, the (as yet) unmanageability of feces and defecation can bring

an empire to its knees, and not only as catastrophe. A way of life premised on delusions of immortality can have no greater enemy than the daily, material evidence of eternal decay.

Few have approached the question of revolution from the nether end. Marxists especially have shown themselves to stick to any discussion of production and consumption, or even the rather more uncomfortable subject of reproduction, over the slightest whiff of that stickier matter of digestion—or, worse still, excretion.

One who was able to coax the anus into speaking was Hocquenghem. That fag who, riding on waves of sixty-eight subversion, pondered the shame which moved his comrades to fuck in the bathroom stalls after a meeting of the Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action. “As if homosexual desire could only be inscribed where repression has inscribed it.” Here was a sign that these bathrooms held a power awesome and strange—and all but invisible—within that hated complex of institutions named capitalism, patriarchy, civilization, etc. He was able to discern that the public prohibitions against certain sexual secretions and anal pleasures were the lurking shadow of the taboos surrounding bodily excretions.

In *The Screwball Asses*, Guy wrote of his comrades:

They can desire almost any body with a dick and an ass... on the condition that it all happens in the shadows, that they fuck without knowing each other, that only machinic organs be involved.

He might have said the same about the desire to shit and the experience of excremental intimacy.

Certainly many an academic of queer theory after him has written a treatise or tract on the architectural construction and psychological planning of the public excretion chambers, noting some of the finer points of their referential queerness. Ever attentive to the security of her or his own post, however, the academic is cautious not to go too far down the hole, preferring to observe and take note from atop the seat, so to speak, as to the hidden meanings of the cocks scrawled upon the partitions and the studious construction of these partitions to erect, by the omission of their bottoms, a bastion of generalized surveillance against the impudic possibilities a stall’s public privacy might otherwise invite. An innovative proposition, to be sure—one might even say bold, though only by comparison to the marked timidity of the academic profession at large—but this analysis remains, for our purposes, rather too tight-assed.

The aforementioned hang-up of revolutionaries with regards to anality should not be understood to extend to those revolutionaries’ subject. It has long gone remarked upon by those proletarians who retain a sense of humor that the bourgeoisie, their authority figures and officials, in short, everyone of high social stand-

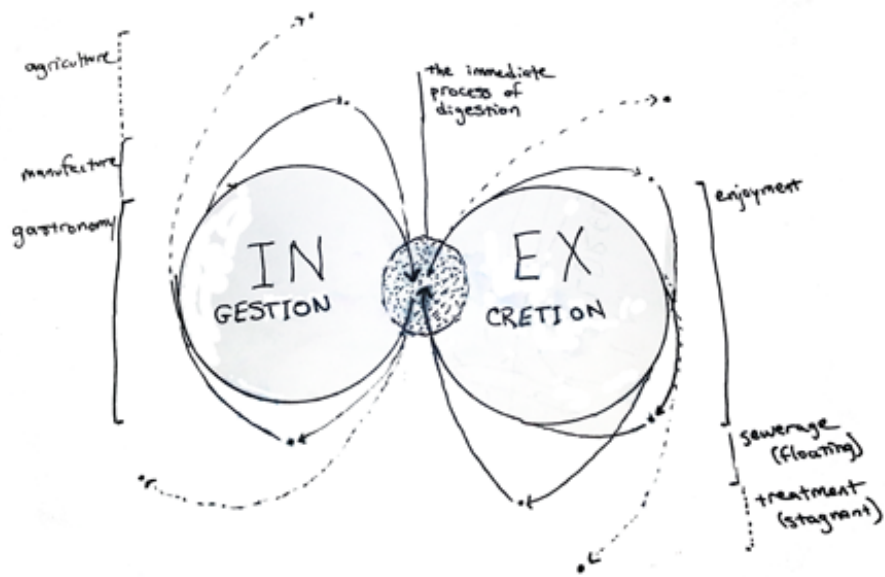
ing, have the remarkable quality of going about acting as if they were utterly incapable of relaxing their anal musculature. All theories of the effects of bourgeois diet and stress upon sphincter tension aside (and this is not to discount their validity but rather because they are irrelevant to our purposes), a few facts remain to be submitted.

First, that the development of civilization, for all its lauded hygienic facilities, has drastically increased the portion of a person's life during which he goes about with his sphincters contracted, either searching for the nearest portal to the municipal sewerage or else postponing until such time as he is obliged to seek it out with urgency.

Add to this the documented inability of many persons to release their bowels in public restrooms (whether due to childhood trauma, the nagging shame of social taboo, or instincts that will not allow a creature to relax in such close proximity to potential enemies), as well as the high rates of kidney stones and sexually-transmitted diseases which make urination painful instead of pleasurable, and the partial or total avoidance of public restrooms by persons who have learned to fear them as places where their genders may be scrutinized and their belonging called into question, not to mention the terror and shame (instilled during the so-called potty training and bed wetting years) that refuse—even in sleep!—to allow the modern human's lower musculature to fully relax, and finally the widespread incidence of indigestion and constipation, and one is faced with a public health issue of unfathomable breadth and depth.

Not that these could ever be deemed an *issue* in the eyes of those responsible for identifying epidemics and mobilizing the populace to rectify them. Quite to the contrary, it is entirely in the interests of power to have a populace that keeps its sphincters well under control, thank you very much, however damaging this may be to its health. Anyone familiar with canine discipline knows well that once an animal is trained to control the time and place of its evacuatory functions, half the battle has been won; in no time it will be rolling over and playing dead on command. Whereas a pet that has not yet learned not to piss the carpet is so hopeless that it is probably best put out of your—pardon, its—misery.

Second, that the protracted and chronic retention of a person's annular muscles coincides with certain behavioral characteristics which may include, without being limited to: extreme tension of voice and bearing often manifest as nasality of speech and stiffness of posture, prudishness, all-around indisposition to fun, edginess, soreness of temper, lack of grace in absorbing either criticism or complement, propensity to take offense to well-humored insult, deficiency of the sense of humor, uncertainty of bearing, passive aggressiveness, authoritarianism, stinginess, neediness, moralism, religiosity, and general unsavoriness of character.



On an instinctual level if no other, we can see that this behavioral coincidence is indeed no coincidence at all, given that a mere common sense would lead one to anticipate, indeed to expect, a retention of one's excrement to dovetail with a proclivity to retain much else besides—status, possessions, emotions, and self-importance, to name but a handful—that this is nothing more than a natural correspondence between the various bodily and behavioral dispositions.

Third, that civilized society has come to value mostly highly and indeed pride itself on the very same behavioral vices which correspond to the ills of a retentive anus and mistreated digestive system.

Here one may remark upon yet another coincidence, this time not behavioral but geometrical (or, one might say, etymological) come upon by means of the following inquiry: How is it that high society identifies itself as high and its outside as low? How indeed. Although this query will be met by its ready cast of pat answers—whether they be architectural (because the powerful sit on high thrones and live in high structures upon high ground), natural (because civilized power is aligned to the celestial powers rather than the terrestrial), social (because to bow is a sign of submission), or military (because in combat the higher position is the advantageous one)—one might object that each has got it ass-backwards. Man's body is his world, his habitation. Given that the body finds itself set in a world of unfolding powers through which it must itself unfold, it develops a sense of its unfolding, a sense that looks ahead, so to speak, a consciousness ever concerned with a forward-thinking interest of survival.

Questions of categorization are the expression of man's consciousness in its grappling with the inner tensions it feels in the organs, especially the digestive ones. The categories he settles upon to identify these tensions once and for all are his rebellious cry that he will finally forgo their continual playing out, that he will stake himself a position, damn it all.

Moreover, man being the only animal who has not only developed an erection but has developed into a walking erection, who places his oral and anal passages on a level plane only when the dyke of consciousness can no longer stand against the surging waves of sleep, he alone has developed a consciousness deprived—by the force of gravity itself—of the digestive and excretory sensations. He knows himself to be above their inferior and unthinking comings and goings-on. Every external gesture of raising or lowering he makes is merely a fitting sign of what he first feels in his body, and then strives to reform his contrary surroundings in the image of. Man (civilized man, we should say) is remarkable for experiencing in his body a great discomfort and irritation (born of his extreme anxiety and lack of respect for the gradual and time-consuming digestive processes, which strike him as so terribly inefficient and upsetting) and dedicating himself to making his escape. Like the majority of those who draw up schemes for man's relocation to extrater-

restrial colonies or to technologically-enhanced, irritation-free post-bodies, he is not seduced by delusions of democracy. The ascension of the consciousness from the body cannot be achieved *en masse*; it will, on the contrary, be unreachable if not from *atop the mass*.

So for the upper echelons and those who strive toward them, the correlation between height and superiority, lowness and inferiority, is fitting for no other reason than because it correlates to their estimation of the body: the superior organs sit atop, keeping things under control and dedicating themselves to the honorable tasks of thinking and planning the escape from the body, from the inferior organs, in particular the ones that gurgle and grumble down below, urging and urging, failing to do anything honorable or socially productive, distracting him from his important labors. It was that man already felt himself to be higher, and for this reason did he build throne and tower, temple and palace, that the world might better agree with his tortured conscience.

And here we must remember that what is at hand is no mere issue of excretion, for we can see, simultaneous to the difficulty and forcedness of excretion in modern society, the negligent, hurried ingestive ritual (often performed even when standing, walking, or driving, and with a notable disregard for proper mastication and, even more disturbing, for the enjoyment and savoring of the foods, which are more often viewed as fuel for the consumer's proverbial engine than as complex materials to be ground down, turned over, refined, and absorbed) and the strained, incomplete digestion whose symptoms include the host of stomach aches, bloating, flatulence, belching and acid reflux (not to mention vomiting) for which our society has become the butt of many a joke.

We can only agree with Nietzsche when he writes in his *Genealogy of Morals* that "modern society is no 'society,' no 'body,' but a sick conglomerate of chandalas—a society that no longer has the strength to *excrete*." In his *Genealogy* not only does Nietzsche trace moral unease and guilt to digestive troubles, he also demolishes the false elevation of mind over body:

When someone cannot get over a "psychological pain," that is *not* the fault of his "psyche" but, to speak crudely, more probably even that of his belly (speaking crudely, to repeat, which does not mean that I want to be heard crudely or understood crudely—). A strong and well-constituted man digests his experiences (his deeds and misdeeds included) as he digests his meals, even when he has to swallow some tough morsels. If he cannot get over an experience and have done with it, this kind of indigestion is as much physiological as is the other—and often in fact merely a consequence of the other.—With such a concep-

tion one can, between ourselves, still be the sternest opponent of all materialism.—)

There is nothing particularly special about excrement, it being only a stage in the process of matter's circulation—nothing, that is, except its tremendous capacity to communicate the details of such bodily troubles, within and without the digestive tract, as may be existent in the creature which produced it. Indeed, it can be observed that all creatures capable of both expelling matter and investigating matter by means of their senses are inclined to regularly probe their excrement and to employ all the senses for this task. While some overimaginative theories as to the purpose of this practice do persist, the fact that it is a self-diagnostic measure, and a good one at that, is no secret to anyone who has observed her own excrement during an illness. The fact that, in this most excretaphobic of societies, it is still medical practice to examine, albeit rarely, the night soil of a patient for evidence of her or his internal goings-on is proof enough of the diagnostic power of this substance. The fact that among the most trending queries to the so-called Google oracle is the set “Why is my poop (green/red/blue/yellow)?” is evidence not only that the modern populace is still trying to listen to its bowels (and that the latter are severely troubled) but moreover that a common knowledge of excremental diagnosis is sorely lacking.

Yes, modern man seems to have no end to hiding his own nature from himself. This fact is known better to the plumber than to any other, and his clients are only too keenly aware that he, even more than the nosy old lady next door with her flower-print blouse and the binoculars she keeps close at hand, knows all about their dirty little secret. One would not be amiss in suspecting that that popular specter of the plumber's crack, comical but for its suggestiveness, is in truth a crack at that most quintessential of cracks in the very porcelain social veneer whose holes the plumber is called to fill, whose leaks he is prevailed upon to seal, and whose cracks he is induced to caulk. That in carrying out such an unspeakably momentous task as the resurfacing of the façade between society and its own decay—that in this very process the man responsible might mistakenly reveal a crack in his own façade, an indication of his own anality—well, there may be no better example of the sort of irony which gives rise to what is known as low humor.

The undeniable fact which man strives to conceal from himself by means of pipe and sewer, septic and treatment facility, is simply that every entrance has its corresponding exit. Man would like to pretend himself to be a one-way street, as he does when he pretends that no private excretion corresponds to his conspicuous ingestion, just as when he believes that no clandestine decay corresponds to the much-boasted progress of his civilization. His absurd play is less one of smoke

and mirrors and much more one of passages and blockages. On the one hand, he sets his mouth to moving overmuch, as if in letting it slack he might remind his company—or himself—that this favorite orifice of his is nothing more than the ornate and self-important gateway to that dark passage, that long passage whose winding and grinding bears witness to his being a creature of digestive capacities, and whose nether end whispers of death and recurrence. On the other hand, he sets his hands to the monumental task of erecting and retaining millions of miles of passages, not unlike his own, a tremendous artificial digestive system, not to mention the multitude of corresponding chambers, both private and publicly private, all with their corresponding porcelain fixtures, automatic flushing apparatuses, odor-masking agents, diaper-changing stations, feminine product dispensers, sanitary hand-drying devices, ecologically-reductive lighting, and discrete janitorial staff, for no other reason than to keep himself from taking note of the fact that he does not and cannot retain what he ingests. The enormity of waste entailed in this insane system of waste disposal has only its most minor portion in the mountains of hygienic tissue, paper towel, and other such disposable products that find their way into the wastebaskets—the greater wasting is dual: that of the vast quantities of potable water rendered incessantly into wastewater with every flush, and that of the equally enormous piles of rich excretory matter swept away to be wasted by the algal colonies of the waste processing facilities.

There is something charming about man's haughtiness in looking upon defecation as somehow beneath him, in acting as if, despite all the pleasure he enjoys in eating, he would consider shitting to be an inconvenience at best and at worst a disturbing reminder of his animality, his mortality. Something best to be cured by the powers of modern innovation, and the sooner the better! There is something terribly endearing about man's denial of himself.

Soft feelings notwithstanding, and without suggesting that it is possible—or desirable even—to banish self-denial from life, we must insist upon flushing away the whole machine that chambers excretion and channels excrement. Revolutionaries have long identified themselves with the underground, and with good reason. Yet, just as Hocquenghem wrote that "The bourgeoisie invented the notion of homosexuality and made it into a ghetto. We must not forget this," just so must we not forget that it was the tight-assed bourgeoisie and clergy who mangled digestion, forbid excretion from being pleasurable and intimate, and imprisoned man's greatest gift to the world beneath a million tons of concrete. It is not to defend our murky tunnels that we fight, nor to seize the power of the skyscraper and bestow it upon the sewer, but rather to expel the whole artificial body and let it rot, that we may become intimate with the fruits of our bowels and benefit thereby.

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