The Anal Voice

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“We are ashamed of shit because, in it, we expose/externalize our innermost intimacy.”
Slavoj Žižek

“Our asshole is revolutionary”
Guy Hocquenghem

Of all the brief, tortuous vignettes in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959), readers most often recall – and, according to the following essay’s argument, for good reason – Dr. Benway’s tale of “the talking anus.” In this vignette, his colleague, Dr. Schafer, bemoans what he believes are the body’s utterly inefficient methods, its lack of economy, that is, its separate holes for separate procedures: “Why not one all-purpose hole,” he complains, “to eat and eliminate?” Naturally, this reminds Dr. Benway of an amusing anecdote about a man who taught his anus to talk. The man accomplished this feat through a series of inverted farts (similar to gulping air in order to force oneself to belch), until he had perfected the skill well enough to tour, where he performed an amusing ventriloquist act entitled “The Better ‘Ole.” The anus, however, soon acquired the ability to speak *on its own*. At first, the anus’s autonomy seemed to improve the act, for now its owner (or is the man now his anus’s partner?) could improvise the routine; but eventually, in increasing anthropomorphic fashion, the anus acquired the ability to eat and drink,
and while this too was incorporated into the act, the anus also, and most problematically, developed a massive inferiority complex and began demanding civil rights. Since such rights were not forthcoming, the anus would get drunk...and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth. Finally it talked all the time day and night, you could hear [the man] for blocks screaming at it to shut up, and beating it with his fist, and sticking candles up it, but nothing did any good and the asshole said to him: “It’s you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don’t need you around here any more. I can talk and eat and shit.” (Burroughs 1990: 120).

What is this fantasy gone awry, this anecdote about an aggressive anus, this scatological master/slave dialectic? Dr. Benway intimates, for example, that this anal coup is akin to the rapid spread of governmental bureaucracy, for it overwhelms its human host “by turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action” (Burroughs 1990: 122). While we should be careful not to leap too precipitously from considerations of the anus to theories of governmentality (it’s Dr. Benway’s reading, after all, not Burroughs’s), we should wonder why political concerns – intersubjectivity, communal relations, civil rights – devolve into scatological musings on the interworkings of the anus.

Freud offers us a clue when he observed that “the relationship between the penis and the passage lined with mucous membrane which it fills and excites already has its prototype in the pregenital, anal-sadistic phase. The fecal mass, or as one patient called it, the fecal ‘stick,’ represents as it were the first penis, and the stimulated mucous membrane of the rectum represents that of the vagina” (Freud 1917: 131). Previously, Freud had emphasized that children surmise that babies are excreted from the anus; my alternative theory, however, puts this infantile assumption aside and instead focuses on what one might call “the phenomenology of the bowel mo(ve)ment.” This scatological observation provides my essay with its critical impetus, for what I call “the anal voice” is the meeting-place of shit and the rectum, of the first penis and the first vagina.

At first glance, Freud’s imagery seems riddled with heterosexist bias, since it borrows, presumably, from straight intercourse. Saying, though, that the first penis is shit and the first vagina is the rectum hardly supports the originary status of heterosexuality because, according to Freud’s observation, it is actually a copy, imitation, or reproduction of the bowel movement. So if one is to speak of anything being universal, it is the anus, and not the genital apparatus, because, as Freud elsewhere observed, “the genital apparatus remains the neighbour of the cloaca, and actually (to quote Lou Andreas-Salome) ‘in the case of women is only taken from [the rectum] on lease’” (Freud 1905: 187n1). In a similar vein, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes
that “although there is no reason to suppose that women experience, in some imaginary quantitative way, ‘less’ anal eroticism than men, there has been no important and sustained Western discourse in which women’s anal eroticism means. Means anything” (Sedgwick 1993: 204; emphasis in original). And again, in the last article Sedgwick was to publish, “Anality: News from the Front,” she returns to the subject – or, rather, to the lack of meaning anything – of women’s anuses. In particular, Sedgwick is responding to clinical psychiatrist Jeffery R. Guss’s claim that “it seems obvious to us now that male anal erotic desire, felt or acted upon, does not destroy the subject, but it does destroy the conflation of phallic hegemony and masculinity” (Guss 2101: 127). Sedgwick replies thusly: “I hypothesized that ‘phallic hegemony’ might instead mean the penis/phallus’s position – as opposed to that of the male anus – as the guarantor of masculinity. Still, what about male desire for a woman’s anus – is that anal desire? Finally I saw that the only condition that would make Guss’s contention true, never mind ‘obvious’ (to ‘us’), would be the prior and entire exclusion of women from the general population of desirers, desirees, anus-possessors, and even readers” (Sedgwick 2011: 172). What Sedgwick had earlier called this “obvious asymmetry” is undone, I will argue, if the anus is primary rather than secondary. “The significant meanings of anality emerge both by refusing “the prior and entire exclusion of women” and by refusing to privilege of “male anal erotic desire” because such exclusions and such privileges are predicated on the demotion of the anus, on relegating the anus to a non-primary position. Implicit in Freud and Lacan, and yet still largely implicit in Žižek, the anal voice is the Event (das Ereignis) that inaugurates the subject qua the subject of discourse, the speaking-being or what Lacan simply calls parlêtre. This important “mo(ve)ment” summons from inside the incipient subject the alien within, the object that is in the subject more than the subject itself. This anal voice introduces the subject to the distinction between inside and outside by way of the bowel movement, that is, by way of the involuntary expulsing of the alien within. The following essay seeks to establish the anal voice’s central role in the creation of the parlêtre by refuting the rectum’s terminal status and by making anus-possession the essential attribute of being human. In other words, this is why (to quote Žižek) “you should give a shit” (Žižek 2001: 56)

In History of Shit (1978), Dominique Laporte asserts that shit’s history mirrors the history of subjectivity. Beginning his comparative history with the 1539 French edict forcing Paris residents to store their fecal waste at home instead of tossing it into the city streets, Laporte notes that sanitation efforts coincided with the effort to purify the French language (or tongue) by noted French intellectuals, especially Joachim du Bellay. My essay’s goal, while similar to Laporte’s, takes not a diachronic approach to the relationship between feces and speech, but rather a synchronic one, for I am reducing “the history of shit” to its auditory instantiation, to the nodal-point that anchors the symbolic order. This synchronic instantiation begins with the
Lacanian symbol ∆, what Žižek calls “some mythical, pre-symbolic intention” (Žižek 1989: 101).

At its most basic, Lacan’s symbol (∆) correlates with the following passage from Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871): “Animals of all kinds which habitually use their voices utter various noises under any strong emotion…but this may merely be the result of nervous excitement, which leads to the spasmodic contraction of almost all the muscles in the body” (Darwin 1990: 580). Darwin provides us with three component parts: (i) “various noises,” (ii) “nervous excitement,” and (iii) “spasmodic contractions.” Beginning with Lacan’s Graph of Desire 1, the question is:

What is different about the way in which excitement, contraction and noise are combined in human beings that separates the speaking-being from the rest of mammalian life? The answer is *intention*: intention (Δ) pierces the signifying chain (S-S’) and then, retroactively, re-pierces it at a temporal point farther down the chain. Until this second piercing, however, the signifier is without a signified: it is just a piece of “various noise,” for the signified is determined not by an object in the world (the referent), but by the retroactive relationship between these two piercings, that is, between two signifiers. The signifying chain or “vector of speech” (S-S’) moves from left to right, even though from intention (∆) to subject (S) it is the second piercing that determines the first – hence, the movement from right to left.

For Lacan, what differentiates the subject from the intention is that, when the latter passes twice through the vector of speech, *something* is irrevocably lost, which is why in the second stage of the graph the subject replaces the intention at the bottom right corner of the graph. It is the ostensible simplicity of the first graph, of the “horseshoe,” however, that makes it so appealing. Once we have the barred/divided subject ($), we are henceforth always already dealing with *parlétre*; in the first graph, however, we are dealing with the inauguration of *parlétre*. For the time being, therefore, we must stick with ∆. This “some mythical, pre-symbolic
intention,” Bruce Fink elaborates, “stands for the human being as a living organism, physical, biological, or animal being: It represents our prelinguistic, presubjective, vegetative state, so to speak” (Fink 2004: 114-15). At this early stage, we are not yet interested in “the elementary cell” or the point de capiton (“button tie,” as Fink translates it); instead, our focus is on what initiates the vector $\Delta$-$\$ in the first place, that is, the trajectory up to its first piercing of the signifying chain. The double piercing, the stitch in the fabric of the signifying chain, writes Lacan, “stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification,” for it “disconnect[s] the thing from its cry” (Lacan 2006: 682). Prior to this piercing, the thing and its cry are the same. What initiates their separation?

We begin with the infant, and with Graph 2

which is a reformulation of Lacan’s mirror stage. Fink writes: “self-consciousness arises...by internalizing the way the Other sees one, by assimilating the Other’s approving and disapproving looks and comments” (Fink 2004: 108). We are not, however, anywhere near Graph 2 yet, for until $\Delta$ twice crosses the signifying chain and becomes the barred/divided subject ($\$), there is no Other. The easiest way to say this is “we see the transformation of need into need addressed to another person” (Fink 2004: 118). Again, Darwin said “various noises under any strong emotion,” and it is for this reason that we should replace “need” with “any strong emotion”: we witness the transformation of any strong emotion into any strong emotion addressed to another. Without the address, we are left with “any strong emotion,” and we get closer to “some mythical, pre-symbolic intention,” or what I will rename a meaningless intention, or even the intentionless intent. Hunger is the archetypical example: the infant feels hunger pains and cries. Since the infant is not a parlêtre, we should be careful not to ascribe to it an intention like, for instance, it felt hunger pains and cried in order to be fed which in turn assuages the hunger pains. The relation between the pain and the cry is much more
spontaneous, especially because the cry signifies only to its guardian that the cry means… the infant needs (some-thing). The infant is not addressing (another person); rather, a strong emotion forces the infant, in its vegetative state, to utter various noises. Need, simply put, is not enough for ∆ to repierce the signifying chain.

Freud stumbled upon this idea precisely because he was sifting through numerous ways of explaining, from the infant’s perspective, the external manifestation of shit, be it baby, penis, or money. Freud realized that he was getting ahead of himself, that concern with the external manifestation of shit was predicated on something internal, which Freud calls a prototype. Where shit reaches the rectum, the birthplace of the anal voice, is the closest approximation that the parlêtre has to an origin, and this occurs (in Freudian terms) in the anal-sadistic phase. Before the infant is capable of deciding whether shit is an object of self-love or object-love, that is, before the infant crosses the threshold of primary narcissism, this forced choice (shit becoming-present as the intentionless intent) is preceded by an act, many acts, of anal eroticism in which the infant necessarily plays the role of passive recipient to the first penis, where it is fucked into existence before it qua subject is there to be fucked.

During the oral stage, the infant is passivity incarnate, for it is vegetative. If we follow Karl Abraham’s guidance, as Freud does, and identify an “oral-sadistic” stage, we come to understand the latter half of the oral stage in terms of “incorporation.” Following a logic akin to Hegel’s concept of Aufhebung, Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis note that incorporation “contains three meanings: it means to obtain pleasure by making an object penetrate oneself; it means to destroy this object; and it means, by keeping it within oneself, to appropriate the object’s qualities” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 336). These three “meanings,” however, fail to coincide in the oral stage; rather, Laplanche and Pontalis’s description corresponds more accurately to the anal stage, for it is here, they both observe, that activity and passivity “emerge[] as antagonistic poles” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 9). This emergence, which will eventually structure all subsequent binarisms, finds its initial expression in the first instances of the anal stage, in the moments before the infant becomes an active participant. What interests us, therefore, is, if we refer back to Graph 1, the repiercing of the signifying chain. The question is: What, when other mammals simply utter “various noises,” causes ∆ to repierce the signifying chain?

Again, we have three component parts: (i) “various noises,” (ii) “nervous excitement,” and (iii) “spasmodic contractions.” We know now that “spasmodic contractions,” at least according to this appropriation of Darwin, is the rectum’s reaction to the becoming-present of “the first penis.” Unlike hunger, however, this becoming-present of the first penis is completely internal (“nothing comes from outside”), although, because the infant is not yet a parlêtre, the distinction between inside and outside is porous, indistinct, even non-existent – that is, until the
arrival of “the first penis.” This first penis is obviously not the infant’s “first” bowel movement; rather, it is the first fecal mass to be “stick”-like enough to treat the rectum as the first vagina. Let us, therefore, write this as an equation: (i) “the first penis” (which, as we will see, comes from “elsewhere”) causes (ii) “nervous excitement” that in turn causes (iii) the rectum to contract that then results in (iv) “the anal voice” plus feces (f), written as (i) → (ii) → (iii) = (iv) + (f). We are still, however, pre-defecation (the question remains open), which is to say that our focus is still on (i) → (ii) → (iii), particularly because the sum total is not shit (this is the remainder); rather, it is the anal voice.

Despite commonsense, the first penis comes from “elsewhere.” To understand what the anal voice is, and what its importance is, we need to better understand how “elsewhere” precedes the inauguration of “here.” At Lacan’s 1954 seminar, Jean Hyppolite lectured on Freud’s “Negation” essay, calling it “an early myth of the outside and the inside,” and paraphrasing Freud’s *Wo es war, soll ich werden* by stating that: “What is foreign to the ego [*moi*] and what is found outside are, at first, identical for him” (Hyppolite 2006: 751). Hyppolite explains: “Freud says that one introjects and one expels, and that there is therefore an operation which is the operation of expulsion without which the operation of introjection would have no meaning. This is the primordial operation that is the basis for the judgment of attribution” (Hyppolite 2006: 751). Expulsion is the key. Without it, Freud asserts, one would not be able to judge whether or not an object possessed specific attributes, because without expulsion “nothing is foreign.” It is only after expulsion asserts itself as a dominant force that introjection commences, that the foreign begins to be (re)presented in things outside oneself, things with “their own” attributes. This is why expulsion leads to the other, more important type of judgment, that of existence. The judgment of existence, which is based on “the relationship between representation and perception,” is entangled in the judgment of attribution, precisely because, for Freud, the aim “is not to find an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to refind such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there” (Freud 1925: 238). “In the judgment of existence,” concludes Hyppolite, “it is a question of attributing to the ego, or rather to the subject (it is more comprehensive), a representation that no longer has an object that corresponds to it, although an object had corresponded to it at an earlier stage” (Hyppolite 2006: 751). In sum, the judgment of existence is founded on the incipient subject’s ability not to find but to refind an object; that is, the subject is always already refinding because its initial experience of an object in the world is not that of introjection but of expulsion. The lost object comes from a “within” *avant la lettre*, so to speak. Expulsion’s thrust creates the borderland where just beyond its horizon the outside (now) begins.

On this borderland, all the more refined elements of adult perception are built, which is why Edmund Husserl thought that the adult perception of another’s body is so rife with problems
that it deserves close phenomenological investigation. Husserl’s investigation leads to the problem of one’s own body, of embodied perception, but it quickly retreats when confronted with the question of origin. The “primal instituting” of an alter ego in “the body over there,” however, is a special case. Here a certain harmoniousness is required, a consistency that indicates, appresentatively, that there is a psyche behind the physical movements out there in the world. Something other, something that one cannot experience originally, is indicated, but if one is to apperceive this there must be something of one’s own, something presented, say, to me, in me, that allows for me to make this leap. Through kinesthesia or sensation of locomotion, one senses that one’s bodily organism is “here,” and everything else is “there.” However, one’s body can also be “there,” and for this reason we must pause. Husserl states that the reason one’s body’s “here-ness” can be understood from one’s own perspective as “there” is that “my bodily organism can (and is) apprehended as a natural body existing and movable in space like any other and is manifestly connected with the possibility expressed in the words: by free modification of my kinesthesia, particularly those of locomotion, I can change my position in such a manner that I convert any There into a Here” (Husserl 1977: 116). While one can move one’s bodily organism over “there” and experience it as if it were “here,” Husserl does not resolve how this “here” becomes “there,” how the body, which is uniquely one’s own, becomes an object in the world. Would not, in this sense, “there” first need to occur “here,” in one’s own body? What Husserl calls “primal instituting” Freud, five years earlier, calls “negation,” meaning that every act of adult primal instituting conceals the disturbing spontaneity of the primal expulsion, and it is in the shadow of the object of this expulsion, which is no longer – or, strictly speaking, never was – present, that the process of perpetually “refinding” it commences, for one never “finds” the thing-in-itself.

During his “Function and Field” essay, however, Lacan defines the precise limit of what expulsion can and cannot inaugurate, for expulsion per se as well as “breaking and entering the body” take place in even the most insignificant organisms. “Why not look for the image of the ego in shrimps,” asks Lacan, “under the pretext that both acquire a new shell after every molting?” What we must keep in mind is that the anal stage is not “a stage in some supposed instinctual maturation,” and this regardless of the fact that the anal stage “is no less purely historical when it is actually experienced than when it is reconceptualized.” We must look not at it backwards, that is, not from effect to cause. Instead of reaching back into evolutionary processes, instead of “looking in protista for the imaginary schema of breaking and entering the body,” we must confront language, for “the effect of language is to introduce the cause into the subject” (Lacan 2006: 217). If this is the case, however, it is time to answer the above. Other mammals simply utter “various noises,” so for humans what causes ∆, “some mythical, pre-symbolic intention,” to repierce the signifying chain? Of course, it is at this point that it should be
admitted: the answer is the anal voice. For without language there is no cause, and there is no place: the anal voice, that is, is the limit.

Jacques Derrida speaks of “the cause closest to our body” (Derrida 1995: 55), and from within the metaphysical tradition, this cause is erroneously attributed to hearing oneself speak, but herein lies the paradoxical nature of the voice. If, as Ferdinand de Saussure argues, phonology is the study of the signifier and if the signifier has no actual, positive existence, existing only in a negative, differential relation to other signifiers, then, according to Saussure, “sound is merely something ancillary, the material that language uses” (Saussure 1983: 107). In this sense, there is no separation between noise and voice so we ought to turn to noise such as the infant’s cry in order to establish what Mladen Dolar calls “the linguistics of the non-voice.” He writes: “This precultural, non-cultural voice can be seen as the zero-point of signification, the incidence of meaning, itself not meaning anything, the point around which other – meaningful – voices can be ordered...The voice presents a short circuit between nature and culture, between physiology and structure; its vulgar nature is mysteriously transubstantiated into meaning tout court” (Dolar 2006: 25). On the one hand, the voice is essentially just various noises, just the material substance that languages uses to create meaning, just “the remainder that doesn’t make sense, a leftover, a cast-off – shall we say an excrement of the signifier?” (Dolar 2006: 20; emphasis added). On the other hand, we have the voice’s role in metaphysics. Rather than an excremental remainder, the voice is a sign of an individual’s presence. If to hear oneself speak [s’entendre parler: entendre meaning both “to hear” and “to understand”] is, for metaphysics, the mark of an individual’s self-transparency, of “pure auto-affection,” which is accomplished only by “privileg[ing]...the voice as a source of originary self-presence” (38). Derrida says that such privileging of the voice is built upon the denigration of écriture, the (material) writing of metaphysics itself. For Lacan, however, the voice remains privileged because of its paradoxical nature: it is both the medium and the message; it is both an object (Dolar calls it “the object voice”) and a substanceless expression of pure presence. “When we’re talking,” writes Žižek, “whatever we say is an answer to a primordial address by the Other – we’re always already addressed, but this address is blank, it cannot be pinpointed to a specific agent, but is a kind of empty a priori, the formal ‘condition of possibility’ of our speaking” (Žižek 1996: 90). The reason this “blank” cannot be pinpointed is because its existence is predicated on an expulsion that creates the void around which the symbolic order operates, which is why, Žižek concludes, “the object voice par excellence, of course, is silence” (Žižek 1996: 92) This silence is not simply the absence of sound; it is, in fact, the hollowing out of the inchoate hubbub of the nascent subject’s being-in-the-world. Around this hollowed-out space, speech must (now) protect the subject from silence, from the voice’s solidity, since this hollowing-out process is the expulsion identified by Freud and highlighted by Hyppolite. The anal voice, the meeting-place of the first penis and the...
first vagina, is silent, not simply because it is “pre-symbolic,” but also because it is literally the gap that separates human beings from biological evolution, the horizon of all investigations into human subjectivity, the always-already removed quantum leap between mammalian life and the speaking-being. The void around which the symbolic order operates, however, forever haunts speech’s inability to become meaning’s weightless, fictionless vehicle, to become pure auto-affection; rather, the vocal is forever tied to an irreducible materiality that hangs, like an albatross, around the neck of every speech-act. This remainder is the material, fecal echo of the expulsion of the first penis; it is the material reminder that the imbricated relationship between expulsion and language creates the place where the first penis was and where, in its place, I come to be.

For Lacan, humans (unlike animals) find feces to be insufferable, but as Žižek explains, this is “not because it has a bad smell, but because it came out from our innermost selves.” And yet, shit is not our central concern. “We are ashamed of shit,” writes Žižek, “because, in it, we expose/externalize our innermost intimacy” (Žižek 2001: 59). Why shame? Because humans harbor a shameful secret, one that we do not properly recognize. Being polite, civilized people, we scurry away in order to defecate in private, and we usually attribute our discretion to common decency. It is simply considerate not to disgust others with our foul fecal odors. Such explanations are hardly surprising. Žižek draws our attention, however, to the underlying concern: intimacy. In short, speaking-beings have an inkling of the paramount importance not of shit per se, but of the process, of the bowel movement in toto. Adult fecal excretions remind the speaking-being, if only unconsciously, that it was beget by the intimate meeting of the first penis and the first vagina, that its most intimate relation is to its bowels, which is why the bowel mo(ve)ment rather than shit has been our focus.

Returning to Burroughs’s “talking anus,” this vignette is about one thing more than anything else: The need to control the anus, to think of oneself qua imaginary ego as in control of one’s body. What better way, therefore, to control the anus, to become its master, than to teach it to talk, for teaching one’s anus to talk is akin to a parent teaching its child to talk. By introducing the child to the discourse of the Other (the parent initially, and inevitably, stands in for the big Other), the parent forever alienates the child from itself, forcing it to become the divided subject of the Other’s discourse, of the symbolic order, thereby barring it from ever returning to its pre-discursive, pre-oedipal origins, that is, to its undifferentiated relation to its initial caregiver/host. Indeed, this process of alienation is not simply the result of coaxing the child into identifying certain objects or actions “out there in the world” with certain phonetic combinations; alienation occurs, rather, when the parent, however unwittingly, forces its child to include itself in this list of identifications (“Who are YOU?” the parent asks, pointing at its child, while the child quickly responds with its Christian name – praise follows and “the game” is
repeatedly endlessly, for the rest of its life), which interpolates the child, allowing it, through mindless repetition (repetition is always mindless), to be incorporated into the insistence of the chain of signification. Simple identification, in fact, is meaningless without this incorporation into signification because there is no strict separation between a child verbally identifying an external object or action and a child verbally identifying itself. It is signification all the way down, for the child’s coaxed pronunciation of these seemingly random phonemes in conjunction with the ostensible presence of everyday objects or actions endows the child with its first presentiment of subjectivity, which, one might think, is utterly foreign to the deceptively simple act of one-to-one identification. This endowment, that is, this onerous gift, is not from the parents themselves, although from the child’s perspective it might as well be; rather, it is language’s gift to the subject, for now language speaks the child, not vice versa – which, according to Lacan, is how the subject is barred/divided. It is due, again, not to the relationship between signifier and signified or between signifier and referent, but rather to the synchronic instantiation of a primordial intention as it twice crosses the signifying chain, creating the barred/divided subject as the relation between two signifiers.

Burroughs provides the anus with the perfect response: “Because we don’t need you around here any more.” Despite the fact that the anus does not speak, this is in essence what it (silently) says. It reminds us of the alien within. Parents, of course, dutifully consult their pediatricians and their “how-to” manuals in order to determine if their child is ready for “toilet training.” The usual indicators, parents soon discover, are: the child follows simple instructions; names the objects involved; controls the muscles responsible for elimination; and, most importantly, expresses verbally defecation’s immanence. The child, in other words, must first be interpolated by the discourse of the Other qua parent, giving the child enough time to acquire the requisite degree of muscular dexterity, before it is deemed capable of understanding, and therefore of taking responsibility for, its bowel movements. Before this time, and in fact during the child’s most crucial stages of linguistic interpolation, it has been at the mercy of its bowel movements, receiving from its shit stimulation that, as of yet, has an ambiguous source, for the bowel movement is neither inside nor outside the body, but rather somewhere in between. Unlike manual stimulation of the genitals, which often begins as early as six months, the child is here totally passive, completely at the mercy of being penetrated from within. Only later (sometime between eighteen months and three years) does the child learn more fully to distinguish the internal from the external, subject from object, active from passive; but without the verbal skills that it is now rapidly acquiring, there is, again, no subject to attach meaning to these primal bowel movements.

Permit me then to clarify once more my definition of the anal voice. I stated that the anal voice is the meeting-place of the first penis and the first vagina; that is, it is the event that
inaugurates the subject of discourse, the *parlêtre* or speaking-being, and it does this important work by summoning up from inside the incipient subject the alien within, that object in the subject more than the subject itself. In addition, I stated that the anal voice is the horizon of all investigations into human subjectivity, the always-already removed quantum leap between mammalian life and the speaking-being. Why the term “anal voice”? In discussing this topic with many people, it has become apparent that every reader of this essay will approach “the anal voice” with hardy skepticism, which is to be expected. The problem usually begins (and often ends) with my title. I invoked *Naked Lunch* at the outset in order to provide a clear illustration of what the anal voice is *not*, though Dr. Benway is certainly helpful. It is not talking out one’s ass, although most assume that, whether literally or figuratively, this is this essay’s raison d’être. Sorry, I reply, no talking anuses. More to the point, the anal voice is not shit, for the appropriate term would then have been “anal object.” In Lacanian terms, the voice is an object, but employing “voice” is especially necessary in order to incorporate the blank or void undergirding all speech-acts. This blank or void returns us to the anal stage, to the meeting-place that thrusts the nascent subject into the signifying process, into the vector of speech. The anal voice, therefore, is not the infant’s first word; rather, it is the primordial address (the meeting of the first penis and the first vagina) that solicits this first (audible) signifier.

So the rectum isn’t a grave, right? “To be penetrated is to abdicate power” (Bersani 1987: 212), writes Leo Bersani, when describing the pre-homosexual, explicitly hierarchical, estimation of classical and early modern male-male sexual relations, and an observation that dovetails with Sedgwick’s remarks concerning female anal eroticism. The importance of penetration derives from Bersani’s artful, unsexed version of phallocentrism: “not primarily the denial of power to women…but above all the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women,” and by “value of powerlessness” Bersani means the value of “radical disintegration and the humiliation of the self,” which he specifically connects to anal penetration” (Bersani 1987: 217). To return to the opening, this is exactly what Sedgwick criticizes when she observes that the anus is a synecdoche for male homosexuality but that there is no equalivant for women, lesbians, etc., that when the female anus is at issue it is always already heterosexualized, so that no one “even pretends to name or describe (never *mind*, value) the anus as the site of *women’s* active desire” (Sedgwick 1993: 205).

Sedgwick is right, of course, about the extant literature; however, by turning to Guy Hocquenghem’s still revolutionary (though now often overlooked) text *Homosexual Desire* (1972), which Sedgwick does in “Anality: News from the Front,” I think that we can see vis-à-vis the anal voice why our assholes are revolutionary. Hocquenghem too would concede Sedgwick’s point, for he also argues that, culturally, the anus is a synecdoche for male homosexuality. For instance, he states, “homosexuality primarily means anal homosexuality,
sodomy” (Hocquenghem 1993: 98). At the same time, however, his remarks are aimed at a heterosexist capitalist system that is misogynistic and gynophobic, racist and colonialist; a fact that Sedgwick highlights in turning to Hocquenghem, for whom “the explosive potential of anal sensation” were inextricably linked to “the undoing of patriarchy, of homophobia…of capitalism, of racist colonialism” (Hocquenghem 1993: 168). The anus is revolutionary not only for male homosexuals, but for anyone whose anus has been secreted away. That is, everyone! “Control of the anus,” wrote Hocquenghem, “is the precondition of taking responsibility for property. The ability to ‘hold back’ or to evacuate the feces is the necessary moment of the constitution of self. ‘To forget oneself’ is the most ridiculous and distressing kind of social accident there is, the ultimate outrage to the human person” (Hocquenghem 1993: 99). In other words, society is an intestinal drama (All politics is anal!), so what we need, both literally and figuratively, are more accidents.
References


