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Illegible Desire: James Purdy's Resistance to Sexual Identity

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Abstract

In his novel *63: Dream Palace*, the American author James Purdy attempts to undo the cultural mechanics that make sexual acts legible as signs for sexual identity. In this chapter, Looi van Kessel problematizes the reading strategy that privileges certain cultural interpretations of sexual behavior over other possible readings. He argues that different incongruent readings are always simultaneously possible, making it impossible to straightforwardly read sexual acts as signs for sexual identity. This is demonstrated by doing exactly what the novel attempts to resist: prioritizing a specific reading over other possible readings, which foregrounds the interpretative violence that is committed by the constant misreading of its main character's sexual acts – by characters in the novel as well as potentially by its readers.

Throughout his career, American novelist James Purdy (1914–2009) has sought to write about sexuality in an anti-essentialist way. His work has always shown a concern with challenging the conflation of sexual acts with sexual identity. Many of his protagonists live out their sexuality in a way that makes it difficult for other characters to make their actions intelligible under the category of identity. In dramatizing a resistance to being described in terms of sexual identity, Purdy is searching for a language which invites us to consider sexuality as a thing that we do, rather than something that we are. Already in his short 1956 debut novel *63: Dream Palace*, Purdy plays around with the manner in which different readings – of both the characters in, and the reader of the novel – would impose a certain identity on someone. Through a series of events in which the actions and behavior of the novel's main character, Fenton Riddleway, are constantly misread for his sexual orientation by those he encounters, the reader is invited to consider the various readings that are applied. Specifically, Purdy signals reading literally and figuratively as the primary modes used to make sense of sexuality and sexual identity, making clear that neither can be

employed unproblematically, as in the novel both types of reading inevitably feed back into fantasies about fixed sexual identities.

In this chapter, I will explore the way in which *63: Dream Palace* problematizes the privileging of certain readings over others in reading the fantasy of sexual identity into someone else's acts. I argue that the point of the novel is that different incongruent readings are always simultaneously possible. However, I will demonstrate this by doing exactly what the novel attempts to resist: by prioritizing a specific reading over other possible readings, in order to foreground the interpretative violence that is committed by the constant misreading of Fenton's acts – by characters in the novel as well as potentially by its readers.

63: Dream Palace appears to follow the conventions of a classic detective novel, posing a mystery to be solved. At the beginning of the narrative, the reader drops in on a conversation between Parkheerst Cratty and the “great-woman” Grainger. While drinking a tall glass of Holland gin, Grainger asks: “Do you ever think about Fenton Riddleway?” (Purdy 85). Fenton, it turns out, was a young man down on his luck whom Parkheerst had briefly taken on as a protégé. Fenton is also the character central to the novel's plot, for the reader soon realizes that a certain mystery surrounds him. Grainger's suggestion that Parkheerst “write down what Fenton did” (85) is the catalyst for the novel's main narrative and, shortly after, Parkheerst starts to tell the story of “what Fenton did,” which was to kill his brother, Claire.

Apprehended within the framework of a classic detective novel, the story takes as its organizing principle a preoccupation with reading. While the interpretative work of the detective differs from that of the reader, the two positions often converge in the way the novel is structured. As it is never made explicit that Fenton actually did kill his brother, the reader needs to look for clues and reconstruct the gaps in the story to solve the murder mystery. These clues are signaled by textual interventions – such as ellipses – and linguistic plays on names. The reader can make sense of these signs only retroactively; as the plot progresses, the reader starts to recognize how previous remarks or plot elements form a part of the answer to the question of what Fenton did. Yet, despite the fact that the novel presents itself as a more or less traditional detective narrative with a murder mystery at its narrative heart, the question of what Fenton did might not be the novel's real mystery. After all, the story is motivated by Parkheerst and Grainger reminiscing about the events that make up the murder plot: the mystery has already been solved for the characters before the reader is introduced to it. There is, however, another mystery hidden in this novel. To solve this mystery, the reader again has to read the novel's signs retroactively. The novel ends with an ambiguous statement by

Fenton, which, I propose, can be taken as a displacement of the initial conundrum.

At the very end of the novel, Fenton picks up his dead brother Claire and carries him up the stairs of their house on Chicago's 63rd Street. While carrying Claire, Fenton says: "up we go then, motherfucker" (145). After this exclamation, the novel stops abruptly, leaving the reader to wonder who is addressed by "we" and by "motherfucker." This abrupt ending and the lack of any narrative motivation for the exclamation pose a second, two-part mystery to be solved: who is the motherfucker that Fenton speaks of and why does the narrative end with this expletive?¹ As the text itself offers no solution to the question of the addressee, the options from which the reader can choose involve multiple possibilities: Fenton could be addressing himself,² his brother, both of them at the same time, or the motherfucker could be an apostrophe that addresses neither Fenton nor Claire.

The ambiguity of this address is amplified by another ambiguity in the novel, which is made apparent when we consider the narrator of the story. The opening scene, in which Parkhearst and Grainger discuss and remember Fenton, frames the narrative, which, in the tradition of a detective novel, is presented as a flashback that reconstructs a crime scene. Grainger coaxes Parkhearst, an unsuccessful writer of a type found throughout Purdy's oeuvre, into telling the story of what Fenton has done. Thus, the external narrator of the opening scene puts Parkhearst forward as the narrator of the central narrative: "Parkhearst would take another drink of the gin; then his voice would rise a bit, only to die away again as he told her everything he could remember" (88). However, while there is a shift in narration, which we assume jumps from an external, omniscient narrator to the character-bound narration of Parkhearst, the tense in which the story is narrated remains the same: "There was this park with a patriot's name near the lagoon. Parkhearst Cratty had been wandering there, not daring to go home to his wife, Bella" (88). Even though the flashback takes on Parkhearst as its focalizer, the narration continues in the third-person singular, treating Parkhearst as a character in the detective narrative that can be seen as his own story.

Parkhearst's appearance as a character in his story frustrates a straightforward identification of the embedded narrator with Parkhearst as focalizer. The undefined identity of the narrator makes the addressee of the utterance

1 Although it has been a common expletive since the 1970s, in 1956 "motherfucker" was a much more controversial word and not at all common in print.

2 Think of the colloquial use of "we" as first-person singular in sentences such as: "here we go."

“motherfucker” ambiguous. Even though the words are directly spoken by Fenton, they are embedded within this ambivalent narration. As the external narrator maintains organizing control over the narrative that would otherwise be the domain of Parkhearst, the reader begins to suspect that there is more to the novel’s mystery than Parkhearst’s point of view can make apparent. Looking more closely at the “motherfucker,” then, raises a new set of questions – what is the meaning of this exclamation? who is addressed? why does the narration stop at this exact moment? – that are not easily resolved. The novel refuses to be read straightforwardly, and I argue that by uncovering these ambiguities we can start to recognize Purdy’s concern with the way in which sexual acts are read as straightforwardly legible signifiers of sexual identities.

As I have hoped to make clear, *63: Dream Palace* frustrates a straightforward reading of its narrative on several levels. It troubles a clear identification of the embedded narrator with Parkhearst as focalizer of the story; in line with the conventions of the detective genre, the reader can only recognize clues that solve the novel’s mystery retroactively by skipping back and forth through the novel’s narrative; the ambiguous addressee of Fenton’s expletive at the end of the novel poses even more questions just when the murder mystery seemed to be solved; and, as I will show in the following, it resists the reading of sexual acts as legible signs of sexual identity. In my reading of *63: Dream Palace*, I will follow its resistance to straightforward or linear interpretive strategies and start with its elusive ending. By starting at the end of the novel and meditating on the possible addressee of Fenton’s “motherfucker,” I will demonstrate how the ambiguity of this address ties in with Purdy’s strategies to resist the practice of turning sexual acts into legible signs for one’s sexual identity.

Reading Fenton from Behind

Starting my own interpretation at the very end of the novel, I take my cue from a reading strategy proposed by Jonathan A. Allan. In his book *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*, Allan reads several canonical texts that center around the configuration of sexuality literally “from behind” (6). “Reading from behind” indicates reading from a backwards position; to scrutinize a text’s assumptions and concerns by tracing problems posed at the end back to the beginning (Allan 18). From this perspective, trying to establish the signification of Fenton’s utterance on the last page of *63: Dream Palace* involves looking to earlier parts of the novel for answers. However, this is not the only aspect of Allan’s project. For him, reading from behind also opens up the potential to uncover organizing principles in a text that are rooted in anal desire

instead of phallic desire, which for him is the primary signifying principle in Western literature. By focusing on the alternative organizing principles of texts that foreground the position of the posterior, such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Myra Breckinridge*, Allan questions the conflation of anal desire with certain assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identification. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who asks “what about male desire for a woman’s anus – is that anal desire?” (155), Allan explores the sexual orientation that is assumed in representations of anal desire and of the anus as the site of sexuality. Anal desire, argues Allan, is not only consistently (mis)read as homosexual desire, but also seen to connote notions of passivity and femininity that fuel homophobic discourses and homosexual panic. Yet, although the texts that he reads often repeat and reinforce these assumptions about the anus, the anus is also always a signifier that cannot be contained. Any reference to, or act associated with the anus, opens up to assumptions about sexuality and identity. As such, Allan argues, the anus has the potential to destabilize the phallus as the organizing principle of Western sexuality.

In reading 63: *Dream Palace* “from behind,” I propose to explore Fenton’s final exclamation as an invitation to the reader to return to the beginning of the novel and to ask which question constitutes its central mystery. Reading back to the beginning of the novel, the question of “what Fenton did” starts to resonate in a different way. Moreover, since the text does not provide conclusive evidence as to who the addressee of “up we go then, motherfucker” is, both Fenton and his brother can be considered plausible options. In both cases, when read literally, the term “motherfucker” raises the specter of incest. If we consider the possibility of Fenton apostrophizing himself by saying “up we go then, motherfucker,” what Fenton did might not only be the killing of his brother, a crime that has already been solved, but also the breaching of the incest taboo.

In the following, I will prioritize one reading over the other – namely reading “motherfucker” literally as referring to someone who has had intercourse with his mother – not because I believe it is the interpretation that makes most sense, but because it exemplifies how such a prioritization uncovers the novel’s own concern with the way in which certain readings are prioritized when interpreting acts as signifiers of sexual identity. My choice to prioritize a literal reading is motivated by Fenton’s own inability to read for anything other than literal meaning.³ Throughout the novel, we find instances in which

3 The novel’s placement within Purdy’s oeuvre provides an additional basis for this interpretation. Incestuous fantasies are a prevailing theme in his work and the novels *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974) both feature scenes of actual intercourse between mother and son.

Fenton is unable to read between the lines and instead interprets everything at face value. This becomes quite apparent from the title of the novel, which refers to an address, presumably the building in which Fenton and Claire live, on Chicago's 63rd street. This address, however, is not written in the common way, which would not include punctuation and would run along the lines of "63rd Street Dream Palace."⁴ This unconventionality would not necessarily draw attention to itself or be considered meaningful if it did not give rise to a comic disagreement between Fenton and Parkhearst, who, upon meeting each other for the first time, debate whether the "63" in the address line should be pronounced "sixty-three" or "sixty-third" (90). Fenton insists that it is pronounced "sixty-three." According to Parkhearst, Fenton never learns to pronounce it correctly.

Fenton and Parkhearst adopt different readings with regard to the pronunciation of the address line. Although the address line does not appear in written form during this brief exchange, there is a considerable possibility that Fenton and Parkhearst's debate over its pronunciation pertains to the way it is written in the title: "63: Dream Palace." After all, the external narrator of this story focalizes from Parkhearst's point of view, who in turn introduces Fenton to the reader by means of anecdote. This specific anecdote immediately draws attention to the story's primary location of action. As a paratextual element to the story, the title is still part of the way in which the narrative is organized by the external narrator, and both the title and the short scene alert the reader to the curious spelling of the address line. While Fenton pronounces it literally in the way it is written – sixty-three street – Parkhearst reads it for what it indicates: a building called Dream Palace on 63rd Street. These readings do not necessarily indicate a change in the meaning of the address line, nor are they mutually exclusive – both still refer to the same address – yet the resulting pronunciations do not fully correspond to each other either. To be fair, the difference in pronunciation does not completely correspond to the difference between figurative and literal readings as processes of meaning-making, but the scene does indicate Fenton's and Parkhearst's different attitudes towards reading. Throughout the novel, these divergent attitudes foreground recurring tensions between incommensurable, but not mutually exclusive readings that are central to the novel's strategy to resist the practice of reading the fantasy of sexual identity into Fenton's actions.

4 See http://pe.usps.gov/text/pub28/28c2_001.htm for the officially preferred writing of US address lines.

One of these tensions between literal and figurative readings can be identified when considering the meaning of the “motherfucker” at the end of the novel. Prioritizing a reading in which Fenton’s exclamation is considered in its literal sense as referring to someone who has had sexual intercourse with his own mother almost inevitably invokes its figurative counterpart: Oedipus, or more precisely, the Oedipus complex.⁵ Jim Dawson argues that the first use of “motherfucker” in American print coincided with the introduction of homosexual characters in the genre of juvenile delinquency novels and credits Purdy’s *63: Dream Palace* as the first one to do so (124). In a similar vein, Roel van den Oever demonstrates that due to the increased popularity of psychoanalysis in postwar America, many authors evoked the Oedipus complex as a strategy to address homosexuality as well as to disavow charges of sympathy for homosexual characters.⁶ The mythical Oedipus and his Freudian counterpart also gesture towards a shift from literal to figurative signification. While in the ancient myth, Oedipus was quite literally a motherfucker, Freud’s adaptation of this myth in his theories of the development of human sexuality treats the desire for the mother as phantasmatic (Laplanche and Pontalis 315). It is in the transition from the literal to the figurative use of Oedipus that homosexual desire becomes associated with the failure to sublimate the child’s initial desire for the mother.

The play on the Oedipal fantasy is made more apparent if we take into account Purdy’s peculiar and often meaningful habit of naming his characters. As in many of his novels, the characters of *63: Dream Palace* have outlandish monikers. The names Parkheast Cratty, Grainger the “greatwoman,” Claire and Fenton Riddleway are all fairly unusual. As is often the case in Purdy’s novels, these names can have multiple meanings and functions, and invite the reader to read them on different levels. Resonating with the detective genre that frames the novel, the name Riddleway comes to literally signify the “trajectory of a riddle.” Fenton’s association with the Oedipus myth is further reinforced when we think of the sphinx whose riddle Oedipus has to solve. With the question “what did Fenton do?” already positing Fenton as the novel’s central subject, the association of his name with ideas of mystery also places him at the center of the second conundrum that needs unraveling: is Fenton the motherfucker that he talks about/to? Although the question of “what Fenton did” can

5 Purdy’s work shows an overall indebtedness to the Greek classics. In her extensive study, Bettina Schwarzschild (1968) traces the many influences of Greek tragedy and philosophy on his oeuvre.

6 See, in particular, the opening chapter “Momism and the Lavender Scare” (5–36) of van den Oever’s book *Momma’s Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture*.

be taken as the organizing principle of both a “straight” reading and a “reading from behind,” in the former reading the question points towards a possible crime scene, while the latter reading foregrounds a tension between literal and figurative interpretations of Fenton’s last exclamation.

Reading back for clues to the solution of the latter question, however, we find that the object of the question starts to shift around. “Who is the motherfucker?” turns into “who is Fenton?” Parkhearst defends his reluctance to tell “what Fenton did” by turning it into a question of identity: “I can’t write down what Fenton did because I never found out who he was” (86). Through the constant repositioning of the questions that make up this detective story – what did Fenton do? who is the motherfucker? is Fenton the motherfucker? – a reading from behind that traces back concerns exposed at the end of the novel to clues provided at its beginning foregrounds the novel’s central concern with the act of reading for sexual identity. In the next section, I will reflect on the implications of the possibility of Fenton being a motherfucker and on how prioritizing this interpretation reflects on the way his sexuality is read as identity by others throughout the novel.

Speak, So That I May Read You

Throughout the narrative there are instances in which characters try to read Fenton’s actions as signs of his identity. At a crucial point near the end of the novel, Fenton is drawn to a theater where Shakespeare’s *Othello* is being performed. While at the theater he makes the acquaintance of a man named Bruno Korsawski, who, in turn, introduces him to the main actor in the play, Hayden Banks. During the play, Fenton cannot help falling asleep, which annoys Bruno tremendously. Even worse, Fenton cannot suppress the urge to pass gas. When, after the performance, Bruno introduces Fenton to Hayden, Fenton cannot find anything to say. Again to Bruno’s annoyance, Fenton remains silent in the company of a man who is clearly interested in him. “You were extremely rude to Hayden Banks,” Bruno admonishes Fenton (139). He then takes Fenton to his apartment, where they are again joined by Hayden. Fenton becomes increasingly intoxicated after drinking copious amounts of bourbon and smoking a marijuana cigarette offered by Bruno. At that point, Bruno starts to kiss and undress Fenton, leading the reader to believe that Bruno and Hayden are trying to take advantage of his intoxicated state. After an ellipsis that follows the undressing, we find Fenton naked in the middle of the room while Bruno and Hayden appear to have been beaten up and Bruno forces Fenton at gunpoint to leave the house.

This short and violent scene, which is nevertheless presented in a comic fashion, plays around with the misreading of the overactive anus as a signifier for a homosexual orientation, or, more specifically, a homosexual identity. Jeffrey R. Guss suggests that in Western fantasies of sexual orientation the anus is “the very ground zero for homosexuality” (39). The association of anal intercourse with homosexuality is so deeply entrenched that the anus itself has become an index for homosexual desire. A man who takes pleasure in the stimulation of his anus is almost invariably read as a (latent) homosexual, no matter what his self-identified orientation might be. Following this notion, it could be argued that Bruno and Hayden mistakenly read Fenton's incessant farting during the performance as a sign of the anality of his sexual orientation. That is to say, just as for Allan the anus is a signifier that cannot be contained, so too is Fenton's anus taken to overflow with meaning as he fails to control his sphincter.

The reading of Fenton's desire through his overactive anus becomes a question of sexual identity when juxtaposed with his silent mouth, for this too is read as a sign by Bruno and Hayden. As Bruno admonishes Fenton for not speaking to Hayden, the reader is reminded of the famous Socratic adage, “speak so that I can see you” (242). This commonplace, when considered in full, can be seen to address the orientation of Socratic desire, which privileges speech over body parts as the site for libidinal attachment. Found in Erasmus's translations of Petrarch's *Apophthegmata*, the entire aphorism reads as follows:

When a wealthy man sent his young son to Socrates for him to assess his character, and the boy's attendant said, “His father has sent his son for you to look him over, Socrates,” Socrates said to the boy, “Speak then, so I can see you,” meaning that a man's character did not shine forth so clearly from his face as from his speech, since this is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind. (242–43)

Socrates is invited to attach his scopic desire to the boy by the father telling Socrates to “look him over.” However, Socrates refuses to attach his desire to the boy's body, instead demanding for him to speak. In this scene, speech is privileged as the object to which Socratic desire can be attached. The displacement of Socrates's scopic desire is motivated by his desire to get to the truth or essence of the boy. After all, speech “is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind.” Socratic desire, then, attaches itself to the idea of there being a truth about someone's being or identity. For Socrates to really be able to appreciate the boy in front of him, he needs the boy to be a speaking subject. Socrates reads the boy's speech as a reflection of his innermost self – as an indicator of

an absolute and essential state of his interiority to which there is no access but through language. This way of reading is akin to how Paul de Man discusses confession as “an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood” (279). In his reading of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, De Man shows how confessions are considered to occur “in the name of an absolute truth which is said to exist ‘for itself’ ” (279). In other words, the language of confession does not correspond to the material world, but to the abstract idea of truth to which we only have access through that language. Thus, the confession produces a truth that exists in and of itself, but only if it is interpreted by its reader as a figurative use of language, in which case the interpretation congeals into the fiction of a fixed identity of the confessant.

If, as De Man suggests, the confession operates as an epistemological use of language that produces a truth that exist only for itself, this truth-claim does not have a referential function, since the interiority to which it confesses can only be made available verbally (280). De Man’s interest in the confession lies foremost in its performative rhetoric, which is “tied specifically to the absence of referential signification” and which “functions predominantly as if the matter had been settled positively” (291). The performative power of the confession operates on the absence of an external referent to which is confessed, while simultaneously rendering that referent present through the very language of the confession. For De Man, this is where the seemingly literal language of the confession – because of its self-referentiality – turns towards the figurative. At this turn, De Man recognizes the possibility for deconstruction, for it is the introduction of the figurative that both produces and disrupts the integrity of the truth that is confessed to (292).

The context of the Socratic aphorism amplifies the tension between literal and figurative reading that is at the heart of Purdy’s novel. Parkheast already introduces a position that privileges a figurative reading when he debates the pronunciation of the address line, and this position is extended by Bruno and Hayden’s reading of Fenton’s overactive anus. Read from this perspective, Bruno’s frustration with Fenton’s overactive anus and silent mouth is not just an issue of politeness. Rather, Fenton’s refusal to speak in front of Hayden also means that he refuses to confess to a certain sexual identity. Without such a confession, Bruno and Hayden can only venture a guess as to Fenton’s sexual orientation by reading his actions figuratively as signs of his sexual identity. In a series of figurative displacements, the passing of gas comes to fill the lacuna produced by Fenton’s refusal to speak. In other words, Fenton’s verbal speech is substituted by a perceived “anal speech-act.” Being taken as a substitute for his verbal speech, Fenton’s “anal

speech" is then read figuratively as expressing an innermost truth about his sexuality: namely as signifying a submissive homosexual desire. The tension between literal and figurative readings that pervades Purdy's novel is played out most extensively in the scenes at and after the theater performance. For the sexual identity that Bruno and Hayden read into Fenton when they take his overactive anus as a confessional speech-act can in fact only be produced by the figurative reading that fills in the gaps left behind by a literal one. In doing so, this reading renders itself vulnerable to the destabilization of the very truth it tries to establish.

Indeed, for Bruno and Hayden, the figurative reading turns out to be a severe misjudgment on their part. After Fenton is kissed and undressed by Bruno, the ellipsis in the text suggests that Bruno and Hayden subsequently molest him. After the ellipsis, we find Fenton "standing naked in the middle of the room, boxing; he was boxing the chandelier and had knocked down all the lamps; he had split open Bruno's face and Bruno was weeping and held ice packs to his mouth" (141). Although Purdy makes ample use of ellipses in his dialogues and of free indirect speech to mark brief pauses, the ellipsis featured at this point in the narrative is unmotivated. As such, it indicates an unspecified passage of time in which Fenton transforms from being passively undressed to being an active aggressor. In this function, the ellipsis is used only once before: after Fenton has had an argument with his brother Claire. There, too, Fenton transforms from passive to active aggressor, as the novel suggests he has smothered his brother to death in the lapse of time covered by the ellipsis.

Conclusion

Having read the novel "from behind," that is, having taken my cue from the issue of ambiguous identity raised at its bottom, I now want to return to the novel's very top: its title, which features a typographic element that frames the novel's concern with misreading the anus and the notion of the motherfucker as signifiers of a certain sexual identity. We have already seen how the spelling of the title provokes a disagreement between Fenton and Parkhearst over how to pronounce it. This comic interaction and the peculiar way in which the address line is written draw attention to its possible meaning and function in relation to the novel's overall concerns with reading and writing (sexual) identity. That is, in the way it is written and in the confusion that results from this, the novel's title already signals a concern with the tension between literal and figurative readings. As we have seen with the figurative connotation of the Oedipal scenario that is introduced by reading the motherfucker literally, from the outset

of the novel we recognize that any attempt to read its title literally is immediately frustrated by its figurative connotations. Just as the typographic ellipsis in the scene with Fenton, Bruno and Hayden frustrates a literal reading, since the elapsed time it marks opens up into a broad set of fantasies about the resolution of the narrative under erasure, so does the typographic oddity in the title open up into fantasies about what the “:” in it might signify. Taking Allan’s provocation to “read from behind” to heart, it is not difficult to find the figure of the anus in the title: Purdy’s preoccupation with textual and linguistic eccentricities invites the reader to pronounce the typographic colon too literally, that is, to take it for its homophone: the anatomical colon.

To extend Purdy’s habitual play on words and punctuation marks, we could say in jest that the anus is also implied in the playful naming of Fenton Riddleway. If the name Riddleway points in the direction of the sphinx of the Oedipus myth, then the novel’s preoccupation with the readability of the anus as a sign for sexual orientation allows for the slippage of this riddle of the sphinx into a riddle of the sphincter: what does Fenton’s anus say about his sexual orientation? While this question is on the mind of the characters Fenton encounters, the novel never offers an unambiguous answer to it. Instead, it stresses the possibility of different incongruous readings coexisting, rendering a univocal reading of someone’s sexual identity impossible. Any attempt to privilege one reading over others results in misinterpretation and does violence to the person being read. Both the anus and the motherfucker hover over the text as specters, as opaque signs that resist being read in one specific way. As such, Purdy recognizes something in desire that resists being read, or being made legible. Looking for a language with which we can address sexuality as something we do rather than as something we are, Purdy dramatizes the tension between these readings, neither of which provides access to Fenton’s desires.

In conclusion, I cannot but admit that for the sake of this argument I too have prioritized one specific reading by interpreting the motherfucker literally as referring to Fenton. Although there is textual and contextual evidence that motivates my reading, other possible readings of the motherfucker are not necessarily excluded by the text. The ambiguity of the address and of the narrative situation make other readings – e.g. of Claire as the addressee or of “motherfucker” as a colloquial term of endearment – plausible. Thus, while my reading argues against the violence committed by imposing a certain reading onto the text, this very same reading performs the violence it argues against. Privileging one reading, as I have done over the course of this chapter, then, at once confirms and undermines Purdy’s project to destabilize generalizing narratives and readings that fix identity categories onto sexual behavior or body language. Taking this project to heart however, the riddle of the sphincter might

have a solution, yet this solution can only be posed in uncertain terms, for what Fenton's anus says about his sexual identity is always at once everything and nothing.

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