theories and methodologies

Thinkiest

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ALL MY FEELING FOR EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK COMES FROM HER WRITING. I WASN'T A FRIEND. I NEVER MET HER OR EVEN HEARD HER GIVE A public lecture or present a paper. The closest we came was being bound together, one after the other, in the same edited anthology, my essay on sequence and precedence in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and its various adaptations following an extract from her *A Dialogue on Love*. If Sedgwick's essay and mine can be said to speak to each other, to strike a conversational pose, as though the breadth of a page might be mistaken for the more sociable span of a bar or table, it is only to point up the spuriousness of this effect. For whatever weight of significance the closing section of Sedgwick's essay might seem to license my finding in this happenstance—"I don't resist . . . secretly fingering this enigmatic pebble. I can't quite figure out what makes its meaning for me" ("Dialogue" 351)—is made implausible with the page's turn by the brutalist facade of my first sentence: "Sequence is its own alibi" (352).

How much more death ramps up the stakes and scales of these kinds of fantastical calibrations of remoteness or proximity. As is often sorrowfully noted, the work of mourning must feel its way inside newly unstable structures of address as the usual conventions of tone, tense, and even nomination buckle under the relational effects of death's transformations of the person. Such transformations, however, do not stop at the person; death also works a textual transmutation by turning writings into a corpus. Despite the etymological connection, the advent of the corpus does not mean that writing dies. (The frequent posthumous spike in book sales suggests instead a widespread faith in writing as afterlife.) Rather, signaling a new finitude, the corpus means no more writing.

I came to Sedgwick late. The first thing of hers I read was *Epistemology of the Closet*, a borrowed copy brought back from England in 1990 by my doctoral supervisor, the margins of which were marked up in the intensely illegible microhandwriting of her then girlfriend, soon to be—and still—mine. Is it possible to be rescued by a book? Until that moment I had been trying to frame for myself a work-

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able critical optic from models of knowledge drawn from my various activist engagements and a raggle-taggle clutch of French feminists in translation. Like many of Sedgwick's readers, I was transformed by the encounter. There were, of course, her big ideas: her insistence that matters of hetero and homo definition are central to Western thought, attaching to scenes with which they have no ostensible connection; her analysis of the irresolvable structural incoherencies of available categories of modern sexual identification; her amplification of the complicated epistemological interiorities of ignorance; her investigation, after Gayle Rubin, of the implications for antihomophobic scholarship of thinking gender and sexuality separately; her revelatory reanimation of the commonplace that people are erotically different from one another in ways that elude the forensic attention of official sexual taxonomies. These are the "thinkiest" ideas (*Fat Art* 160) in *Epistemology* and definitely the most portable, converted into the textbook plain style of countless introductions and summaries and briskly commodified as "ideas" with their own independent value and circulation.

And there were—there remain—her minor ideas, those perceptive reorderings of critical and everyday truisms made sotto voce, almost as asides, buried in arguments apparently bent in some other direction and often missed on first reading. Here are some of the ideas tripped by my rereadings of *Epistemology*: sexual identity, although not sexual practice, is always relational; the incommensurability of scale between systems and individuals does not fully determine the outcome of their engagement; oral sex is less amenable than anal sex to the disciplinary codings of active and passive; the levels of psychic energy it takes to write a book might be necessary to reading one.

Reading Sedgwick for the first time was something like what I imagine it would feel to be fired from a cannon, spangled and spectacular, newly aerodynamic, holding everything together—including a temporarily aerial perspective—courtesy of an extrinsic propulsive force. Although I know *propulsive* to be a word Sedgwick favored and so for me now always "Eve-saturated" (Kincaid 237), I was surprised to reacquaint myself with the knowledge that she had already more or less envisaged this whole scene as one frame of a complexly rendered account of her relation to reading *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which "to be shot into this circulation with the force of some extra quanta of borrowed energy ('Proust') and with a disposition to travel always offers the chance, for long enough, of feeling like mastery" (*Epistemology* 242).[1] This can happen more often than is seemly or, more to the point, scholarly. I have lost count of the times that, nursing a figurative turn of phrase or worrying the frayed end of some idea, I have stopped in what would be horror if only it didn't so often resemble pride, on finding Sedgwick's fingerprints all over it already, myself little more than an accessory to the crime of my own authorship.

Although Sedgwick's phrasing is so well turned as to go on the high-rotation playlist of scholarly citation and her arguments are sustained with apparent effortlessness over the length of her buff essays, the unit of Sedgwick's thought is, I think, the sentence. Her fans and her detractors agree on this when they describe her style as "Jamesian" (Weeks 412; Van Leer 127), by which the former mean complex and the latter mean convoluted. She was a James scholar—her essay on "The Beast in the Jungle" was "the inaugurating investigation" of *Epistemology of the Closet* (183)—and her style has affinities with James's. There is the nip and tuck of their punctuation—a fondness for the parenthetical dash, which affords a small space of expansion for emphasis or something nearly forgotten, and for the semicolon, which dams the rush of the sentence only to increase it. There is the arch formality of their diction, the precision of which is not lessened by its often being the vehicle

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for if not actually a joke then a structure of address characterized by wryness. (For example, of *Epistemology of the Closet* Sedgwick writes, "[I]t seems inevitable that the style of its writing will not conform to everyone's ideal of the pellucid" [18].)[2] And there is the sense their sentences afford of being anchored to a position of narratorial rather than authorial stoutness—what Sedgwick herself calls "the Jamesian singular point of view" ("Queer Little Gods" 205)—a position that has more to do with perspective than personhood.

To read Sedgwick's sentences—even, sometimes, to reread them—is to apprehend an uncommon scene: the pedagogical at the moment of its transubstantiative purchase. It is to register, beyond or behind the specificities of what is being read, the alchemy of one's own being made smarter. And yet to process through Sedgwick's at once exuberant and disciplined sentences is not to feel processed by them. The generosity of her writing—by which I mean both its embrace of things more usually presumed to have nothing to say to each other and its insistence that knowingness is not the best measure of an argument's worth—extends to readers a new license for what can be held thinkable. It is a wordless transaction, but if the readers in such scenarios spoke, they would say not "I see," a grateful accession to another's point of view, but a more self-flattering claim to a shared perspective: "I know." Sedgwick, of course, says it better. In describing her encounter with Buddhist pedagogy, she represents the mode of her learning as one of assent: "mainly an exchange of recognition—at best, of surprising recognition. As if the template of truth is already there inside the listener, its own lineaments clarified by the encounter with a teaching that it can then apprehend as 'true'" (*Touching Feeling* 165). Even for those of us who read professionally, as it were, such pedagogical events are a rare experience, but to me they simply characterize what it is to read Sedgwick, sentence after sentence.

Alongside all the other things it means, then, the prospect of no more of Sedgwick's writing registers as a loss of capacity in myself, a circumscription of my intellectual futures on what sometimes feels like the trading floor of the academy.[3] This feeling would seem so narcissistically wide of the mark as to be better left unsaid were it not for the fact that here, as reliably elsewhere, Sedgwick has already drawn a bead on the matter with her question "What does it mean to fall in love with a writer?" (Sedgwick and Frank 117). She asks this question in an essay cowritten with Adam Frank in which the two explore their attachment to the psychologist Silvan Tomkins, a figure whose place in queer studies is secured by their devotion. For Sedgwick and Frank, to be in love with a writer means at least two things: wanting to make others love the writer and wanting to make others get how well the writer loves you. In the light of the first wish, Sedgwick and Frank try "to propagate among readers nodes of reception" for what they find uniquely adorable in Tomkins's work; in the light of the second, by way of demonstrating how his formulations anticipate theirs, they long "to show how perfectly Tomkins understands" *them* (117). What endears this account to me is not only the way in which the attempt to alleviate what might seem the minor scandal of falling in love with someone one has only read embroils Sedgwick and Frank in the more presumptuous gaffe of fancying themselves at the proper center of the transferential scene of reading but also the way in which the stylistic extravagance of this one-two punch expresses my feeling for Sedgwick by capturing what it means to fall in love with a certain order of writing.

Notes

1. For a characteristically Sedgwickian use of *propulsive*, see, e.g., the last sentence of *Epistemology of the Closet* (251).

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2. In making this comparison, I wouldn't want to forget that Sedgwick is also fond of working in the vernacular and does not shy from elsewhere using "pellucid" in the same sentence as "shit-kicker" (*Epistemology* 141).

3. Glossing an argument of Lauren Berlant's, Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark write, "Mobilized around the signifier 'Sedgwick,' this field [of queer studies] is the privileged social space in which the telling of heroic stories of *becoming possible* in a heteronormative world can stand in for the rather more banal experience of *becoming academic*" (31). No doubt it might, yet not necessarily. My experience of becoming academic—indissolubly connected to my experience of reading Sedgwick in 1990—registered for me more as a possibility than as a banality, something unanticipated that opened onto new prospects at once stabilizing and risky, the affective scale of which was most familiar to me from earlier projects of making sense of myself in heteronormative institutions both familial and academic.

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