Epistemology of the Closet. *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Pp. vii+258.

Eve Sedgwick's latest book begins by proposing that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (p. 1). Readers of contemporary criticism are no doubt habituated to similar claims on the part of feminist or African-American critics. Nevertheless the insistence that sexual "orientation" command center stage still represents something of a novelty. Thus Sedgwick's opening gambit and the book it initiates mark a relatively new assertiveness on the part of gay-identified and antihomophobic theory. *Epistemology of the Closet* is not, however, just a reflective index of gay studies' new intellectual respectability, for nothing has produced that respectability more visibly than Sedgwick's recent publications. The author obliquely recognizes her book's significance by observing its introductory function; as the apostles of deconstruction like to remind us, the introduction implies a foundational presence. In short, *Epistemology of the Closet* seems destined to perform for gay studies what Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981) did for the resurgence of Marxism: mark the institutional arrival of a once-marginal field with a text that both consolidates earlier achievements and propels them in a new direction.

To note a text's preeminence may sound distinctly suspect in a theoretical atmosphere pervaded by distaste for authority. It therefore seems useful to point out not only that the preeminence is richly deserved but also that the author staunchly resists the totalizing potential of her own popular visibility. If *Epistemology* sometimes takes on the flavor of an introduction, it nevertheless resists the desire to reach narrow conclusions. Indeed Sedgwick is so reticent in making judgments that one almost yearns for a less delicate and more polemical approach. Ironically, the introductory section floats a set of "axioms" on sexual behavior alongside the most explicit repudiations of programmatic intent. The text takes care to underscore the partiality and provisionality of its own remarks—striving, paradoxically, to provide a cognitive foundation while leaving all theoretical options open. The consequence of such generosity is a marked reluctance to make definitive statements: "The only imperative that the book means to treat as categorical is the very broad one of pursuing an antihomophobic inquiry" (p. 14). This resolution is broad indeed, but not, in current gay scholarship, particularly controversial. The very avoidance of controversy nevertheless contributes (productively) to

the book's status as a central—and centralizing—work in a hotly contested academic terrain.

Part of *Epistemology*'s power lies, then, in its ability to distance itself from the contradictions it simultaneously invokes. This is most obviously true with the hermeneutic grid that Sedgwick adopts to restructure perceptions of sexual behavior. Instead of the tired debate between constructivist and essentialist views of sexual identity, she offers an opposition between a "minoritizing" account—which isolates homosexuality in a distinct and largely stable minority—and a "universalizing" one—which regards homo- and heterosexual definition "as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (p. 1). The advantage of the fresh set of terms lies in its avoidance of etiological questions that are, for Sedgwick, irrevocably contaminated by fantasies of homosexual eradication. *Epistemology* supplements and bisects this dichotomy with an antithesis based on the relationship of sexual preference to gender identification. Along the axis of this second opposition Sedgwick stages a collision between gender-transitive theories, which stress the perceptual instability of the homosexual's gender affiliation, and gender-separatist philosophies, which define homosexuality as the very essence of one's gender.

Sedgwick's readings of Wilde, James, Melville, Nietzsche, and Proust amply testify to the utility and subtlety of these explanatory models. In promoting new terms of analysis, however, Sedgwick claims to accord neither side of the binary oppositions a particular ontological privilege. Her interpretations are remarkable precisely for their insistence that such choices are neither pragmatically effective nor intellectually credible. She argues, for example, that in the antinomy between universalizing and minoritizing views "not the correctness or prevalence of one or the other side of this enduring deadlock but, rather, the persistence of the deadlock itself has been the single most powerful feature of the important twentieth-century understandings of sexuality. . . . This deadlock has by now been too deeply constitutive of our very resources for asking questions about sexuality for us to have any realistic hope of adjudicating it in the future. What we can do is to understand better the structuring, the mechanisms, and the immense consequences of the incoherent dispensation under which we now live" (p. 91). The principled refusal to take sides is based not on pretensions to "neutrality," since Sedgwick makes personal preferences abundantly clear. It derives instead from an unusual openness to alternative views and, more specifically, to minoritizing and gender-separatist strands of gay thought that Sedgwick respects but does not share. While there may, she admits, be tactical reasons to adopt

specific stances in particular situations, the most productive overall strategy is to accept contrasting views simultaneously. She reasons that gay and lesbian praxis should, and inevitably does, operate as "a multipronged movement" whose competing political positions "proceed in parallel without any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them" (p. 13).

The "cost in ideological rigor" implied by this move is, as Sedgwick herself observes, substantial. In theory, of course, the deemphasis on "internal" polemics unifies gay-positive concerns and directs attention to the fight against heterosexist privilege. In practice, however, the logic of Sedgwick's arguments leaves little room for this (or any other) kind of conflict. Despite its categorical antihomophobia, the text's pluralistic approach undermines the premises that distinguish between nurturing and punitive reactions to same-sex desire. Although "the book's strongest motivation is . . . the gay-affirmative one," the contradictions *Epistemology* scrutinizes are "not in the first place those between prohomosexual and antihomosexual people or ideologies" (p. 1). In fact Sedgwick's readings show, with luminous acuity, just how flexible and unstable the boundaries between homophobia and homoeroticism can be. In them the contest between pro- and antigay forces appears every bit as pervasive and historically intractable as the dispute between adherents of minoritizing and universalizing views. Consequently we may well wonder why competing attitudes toward same-sex desire—attitudes alternately phobic and supportive—do not appear as structurally determining and epistemologically undecidable as the controversies within the gay political scene.

The decision to pluralize options for reform does not, of course, make the book apolitical or even potentially homophobic. On the contrary, *Epistemology* sustains a laudably specific emphasis on the contemporary social implications of its turn-of-the-century problematics. The relation it posits between minoritizing and universalizing options is patently fraught with consequences for practical politics, especially since lesbian and gay activism has traditionally depended, as Sedgwick points out, on analogies with the rights of racial and ethnic minorities. *Epistemology*'s treatment of minoritizing strategies bears a relation to political action, and Sedgwick's reluctance to criticize those strategies—despite personal affinities for the universalizing view—marks a desire not to forgo participation in the realm of collective practice. Her evident discomfort with that practice emerges in the discussion of J. E. Rivers's *Proust and the Art of Love* (New York, 1980), a book Sedgwick associates, not implausibly, with the "normalizing minority politics of gay rights" (p. 216). This pejorative equation of identity politics with normalization—which the book reinforces

elsewhere (p. 58)—appears surprising. The Left often justifies its coalition boundaries, after all, with the claim that they generate not (as Sedgwick suggests) a conformist normativity but a heterogeneous pluralism. Distaste for Rivers's book exemplifies a broader suspicion that identity politics, with its de facto stabilization of a homosexual ontology, too readily accepts established parameters and (therefore) occludes more liberating possibilities. While Sedgwick obviously thematizes the operations of a same-sex erotics, she also (and just as often) exhibits a desire to explode its most visible representations.

Following this logic, *Epistemology* warns that Rivers's pseudopositivist convictions deprive homosexuality of its heuristic interest through an "almost heroically resolute banalization of the issue of sexual choice" (p. 215). Put otherwise, Rivers's minoritizing approach repels through its intellectual vulgarity. The hostility to Rivers reminds us that despite a putative agnosticism on questions of political strategy, *Epistemology* derives most of its force and sophistication from a universalizing paradigm. In an almost tautological sense, Sedgwick's theoretical superiority to traditional gay scholarship depends on her conceptual distance from its naively foundationalist (read: minoritizing) assumptions about sexual identity. The novelty of her work depends, that is, on an ability to draw gay male debates from the parochialism of a closed, internally consistent discussion into the broader, more "universal" continuum of heterosexual, and male homosocial, relations. The achievements of *Epistemology*— as of Sedgwick's earlier volume *Between Men* (New York, 1985)—relate to previous sexual analysis in much the way that gender studies relates to women's studies: the latter term gains theoretical prestige by giving up its separatist impulses and acknowledging dependence on a differential construction.

The universalizing model and its conceptual refinements stand behind one of *Epistemology*'s most persistent concerns: the desire to identify gay male significations within tableaux of more general (i.e., heterosexist) currency. To this end Sedgwick identifies a range of common, apparently "neutral" binaries—natural versus artificial, art versus kitsch, and so on—that are substantially inflected by homo- and heterosexual definitions. The book shows in particular, as its title suggests, that twentieth-century epistemological problems take on a decisive coloration from the structures of knowledge and secrecy, privacy and suspicion, that organize and inhabit the homosexual closet. Under the regime of that closet, problems raised by sexual orientation no longer serve as the marginal preoccupations of a "special interest" group; they become crucial constituents of the West's most basic cultural developments. Unfortunately, the gesture that grounds

sexuality's importance for contemporary culture simultaneously validates the closet's centrality in organizing gay identity. The juxtaposition of questions of knowledge and sexual orientation "risks"—as Sedgwick herself remarks—"glamorizing the closet" (p. 68). Such risks are worth running, she believes, because of the narrative excitement and conceptual complexity that the spectacle of the closet provides. Nevertheless the project of unpacking that complexity presupposes a complicity with the cultural construction it ostensibly tries to denounce. "I've wondered," Sedgwick confesses, "about my ability to keep generating ideas about 'the closet,' compared to a relative inability, so far, to have new ideas about the substantive differences made by post-Stonewall imperatives to rupture or vacate that space. . . . May it not be influenced by the fact that my own relation, as a woman, to gay male discourse and gay men echoes most with the pre-Stonewall gay self-definition of (say) the 1950s?" (p. 63).

As this quotation presumably suggests, one of *Epistemology*'s most endearing traits is a nervous self-consciousness about the liabilities of its own analytic project. Sedgwick disarms antagonistic responses with a foresight that addresses, always delicately, the book's apparent limitations: its neglect of women, its dependence on canonical texts, and the appropriative tendencies of its vicarious perspective. Despite (or because of) these limits, Sedgwick's work will provide an essential springboard for the new generation of lesbian and gay criticism. At the same time the book shows a need to perceive conditions that exceed its theoretical horizons—the need, that is to say, to imagine worlds beyond the epistemology of the closet.

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