Eve Sedgwick, Once More

Lauren Berlant

Once upon a time, a very round, very red-headed woman wearing a purple caftan concluded a talk on the erotics of poetic form by inviting my colleagues to rethink sexuality through considering, among other things, their own anal eroticism. On this occasion Eve Sedgwick was delivering something that *Critical Inquiry* was not, ultimately, fortunate enough to publish, the brilliant "A Poem Is Being Written" [*Representations,* no. 17 (1987): 110–43]. The gasp in the room at her invitation or "permission"—of aversion, surprise, and sheer pleasure—was delightful and unprecedented in my experience of academic performance. It was not a surprise intellectually, however, because Sedgwick's first two books, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986) had already made me gasp, resist, have reveries, think twice, think bigger, and become different in my analytic practices. She helped me to slow down as a reader: she changed how I paid attention to aesthetic and affective dynamics.

Sedgwick dedicated her remarkable intellect to asking about patterning, especially in the relation of aesthetics to sexualities. The parts of queer theory and literary history on which she had the most impact had therefore to do with the creativity and insistence of desire in all its mediations, even in the face of massively elaborate and institutionalized phobias against recognizing the gay and lesbian forms of it. *The Epistemology of the Closet*'s "nonce taxonomy" is my favorite, a concept that tracks the inventiveness of desire in finding form and singularity not just in attachment to normative sexual objects but anywhere it can. She was interested in desire's affective textures—for those with contested sexualities, in joyous identifications or in shame and paranoia and, regarding the heteronormative, in

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the "privilege of unknowing" that bracketed off what was inconvenient about the insistence of homosexual attachments in desire and history.

Sedgwick was inspired by Silvan Tomkins and Buddhism, because the subject is structured there as a patterning that can be shifted (not revolutionized) when new objects enter into the circuit of belonging or the dialogue on love. She was moved by literature because through it she could track the ways some people (James and Proust and, later, herself) took themselves as objects through others and through art. The political component of this, translated through Melanie Klein's concept of the "depressive position," was to focus on converting the depression and rage that can come from being a shamed subject to emphasize repairing what has been broken in the relation between individuals and worlds. She identified with and as gay men, the fat, the ill, and the queer. She was a being of great scale and impact who was cheeky and yet careful, gestural, meditative. She was bruised by other people's conventionality, and also had tremendous fidelity to her own judgment. She had great warmth and improvisatory capacity, and was always inviting you to give her way a try, because she so wanted people not to be stuck. Her scholarly work moved between literary archives to anything, including all kinds of writing, because the point was not merely to reveal qualities in an object but to create a scene of genuinely transformative pedagogy.

After Eve Sedgwick's death, on 12 April 2009, a surprising number of people wrote me consoling me for the death of my teacher. She wasn't, technically—she was my brainstorming friend—although "storming" isn't quite right, it was more like brain-nudging, the way cats push at legs. But her position *was* fundamentally as a teacher—the kind who helps you find your sea legs while encouraging you to appreciate being wobbly in knowledge.

Critical Inquiry published three essays of Sedgwick's, plus a commentary, and a coauthored piece. They're serious, transformative, exquisitely written, and often very funny. Her bravery at bucking aesthetic, professional, discursive, and aesthetic normativity always made the editorial meetings where her work was discussed scenes of intense argumentation, worry, wonder, and pleasure. On behalf of the editorial board, and on my own behalf, I want to express the deepest gratitude for her work, to send out solidarity and sympathy to the people who consider themselves her people, and to encourage like work—brave, experimental, and pre-

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cise—to remain prolific and undefeated regardless of whatever new forms of critical retrenchment and unimaginative conventionality emerge.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Sexualism and the Citizen of the World: Wycherley, Sterne, and Male Homosocial Desire," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (Dec. 1984): 226–45.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Tide and Trust," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Summer 1989): 745–57.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 818–37.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Winter 1995): 496–522.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Dialogue on Love," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Winter 1998): 611–31.