

## READING A POEM IS BEING WRITTEN: A TRIBUTE TO EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

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I struggled for two weeks to figure out how to put my thoughts about the readings of this panel<sup>1</sup> into a coherent short presentation that would speak to what I understood to be its main question: “How can we upgrade our understanding of affective life, of the psyche, of the legal construction of altruistic and individualistic social relations?”<sup>2</sup> Family law has long remained within a bipolar mode of looking at the world: good/bad, altruistic/selfish mothers/fathers, who often fit neatly into victim/perpetrator dyads. We were assigned readings<sup>3</sup> that challenge this legally constructed version of the world, offering instead a vision of the emergence of human egos riddled with struggle, ambiguity, aggression, love, and a sexuality that is simply too unruly to fit comfortably within any of our legal categories. My ambition to produce the presentation that would do justice to the two texts *and* answer some of the main questions of the panel, however, was antagonized by a desire that only allowed itself to emerge at the last minute. I realized, at the ultimate moment, as I was once again before a conference toying with the alternate fantasies of absolute triumph and complete humiliation, that this ambition was not nearly as strong as my desire to perform what the second part of the panel’s title suggests: to offer a tribute to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to drop Freud, and to drop the aspiration to produce a coherent link with family law. I had a hunch, which has thankfully been confirmed, that my fellow panelists would do a much better job than me at linking Sedgwick, Freud, and family law. My own desire was to convey the feelings that Sedgwick’s text had provoked in me and to describe as best as I could why I thought this was such a unique and precious piece of both theory and literature.

But now that I had given myself narcissistic license, I still needed to get a grip on what exactly had happened to me while reading *A Poem is Being Written* and why I thought this was such an amazing text, a task still strikingly elusive in the early morning before this conference. Reading *A Poem*

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<sup>1</sup> Reconceptualizing the Affective Family: A Tribute to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Family Law Summer Camp, Harvard Law School (July 14–15, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Draft Program, Family Law Summer Camp, Harvard Law School 4 (July 9, 2009) (on file with Harvard Law School Library).

<sup>3</sup> The panelists were asked to read two texts: SIGMUND FREUD, “A *Child is Being Beaten*,” *A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions*, in FREUD ON WOMEN: A READER 215 (Elisabeth Young-Bruehl ed., 1990); and EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK, *A Poem Is Being Written*, in TENDENCIES 177 (1993).

*Is Being Written* was extremely exciting and at the same time discomfoting. It was an event, an encounter with Eve Sedgwick, during which she had actually done something to me and with me, but I couldn't quite say what yet. In any case, it had been a while since any text had managed to capture my attention in this way. After a year of intensely instrumentalized literary encounters (I was in the job market for a legal academic job), the Eve Sedgwick piece had left me feeling curiously revitalized.

Feeling "curiously revitalized," however, was still a strikingly vague description of the mixed reactions that reading *A Poem is Being Written* had provoked in me. Shuffling through my copy of the piece, I was stunned to find clarity not in myself but in Eve Sedgwick's postscript, which had somehow previously eluded my—at least conscious—attention.

Part of the motivation behind my work on [the essay] has been a fantasy that readers or hearers would be variously—in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, "permission," exclusion—stimulated to write accounts "like" this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those.<sup>4</sup>

I paused in disbelief. Not only had she managed to produce most of those feelings in me, but in the exact order in which she had put them forth: anger, identification, pleasure, envy, and yes, stimulation to write and perform an account like hers. I decided that what I would do in this short presentation would be to walk you through my anger, identification, pleasure, envy, and stimulation, narcissistically responding to Eve's own narcissistic invitation. This struck me as a proper tribute to her both in the sense of "a gift or service showing respect, gratitude, or affection" and in the sense of "a payment . . . in acknowledgment of submission."<sup>5</sup> (Notice reader I am already calling her Eve, a sure if not puzzling sign of intimacy.)

So here it goes.

#### ANGER

I started reading the essay in the same mode I read Freud's essay, which is, by the way, how I read most law review articles:<sup>6</sup> stomping through to a military rhythm, which allows for enough disconnect with the language and control of my intentions to scoop up whatever substantive insight I can get and run with.

So I started marching through the text, but Eve had no intention of letting me do that: "This essay was written late"<sup>7</sup> . . . blah, blah, blah . . . I

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<sup>4</sup> SEDGWICK, *supra* note 3, at 214.

<sup>5</sup> MERRIAM-WEBSTER'S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 1260 (10th ed. 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Franke has already poignantly observed in this panel how strikingly familiar Freud's style is to the law review genre.

<sup>7</sup> SEDGWICK, *supra* note 3, at 177.

marched on . . . “to the extent that it represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year-old child, Eve Kosofsky”<sup>8</sup> . . . blah, blah, blah . . . marched on . . . “What comes late, here, is then not her claim itself, which both deserves and was denied respect because of its commonplaceness, but the rhetorical ground on which alone it can be made audible, which is unfortunately and misleadingly the ground of exception.”<sup>9</sup>

At this point I had to stumble to a complete stop. Military rhythm was decidedly not the way to go. Eve seemed to be distilling her meaning into precisely measured sentences, each of which required careful consideration. Eve demanded more attention than I had initially been willing to bestow.

By the bottom of the first page, I needed to pause and ponder the effect that the style she had chosen—she calls it the “visibly chastised” as well as her “favorite style”—was having upon me.<sup>10</sup> I felt intrigued but also pushed around. Having to read and re-read each line carefully, with the intense anxiety that I might miss something if I didn’t pay enough attention to Eve’s intricately woven intellectual travails as she retraced the emergence of both her ego and her literary style, made me angry for the loss of control inflicted on me. Eve forced me to take off my military uniform and proceed slowly, paying respectful attention to her nine-year-old self’s intellectual and artistic life, accomplishing the goal she admitted to from the opening line of the essay.<sup>11</sup> I felt chastised like her text and angry for being subjected to her discipline.

#### IDENTIFICATION

By the next page, the anger of being pushed around had subsided, replaced by an eerie feeling of knowing; knowing exactly what Sedgwick was talking about when she took us alternately inside the souls of an impoverished and resentful father and his “problem child,” Beatrix, both characters in a Sedgwick poem set in Victorian times.<sup>12</sup> The poem had inexplicably made its way onto the second page of this essay, puzzling the reader, ok, at least me, as to its provenance and purpose. If this is an essay on “spanking and poetry” and on the absence of a discourse on female anal eroticism, as she informed us early on, what was this awkward narrative poem doing in the introduction?<sup>13</sup> Sedgwick describes the poem as her very own “problem

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Her essay begins with the following sentence: “This essay was written late: twenty-seven years late, to the extent that it represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year old child, Eve Kosofsky.” *Id.* at 177.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 178.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

child,” refusing to grow when she wanted it to.<sup>14</sup> What she claims she wants us to take from the poem is “the theater” of a family created around the nude child who is being washed in a tub by her resentful father.<sup>15</sup> It is true that the tableau was striking; I found it just as intolerable as the poignant close-ups on the decrepit Old Edie character in the movie “Grey Gardens.”<sup>16</sup>

The main thing that I experienced, however, was what Eve predicted I would in her postscript. I read the poem feeling identified with the infant child who is struggling to comprehend her world with whatever means at her disposal, and touched by the mature poet’s painfully insightful descriptions of the child’s fledgling ego:

What, in all that time, did Beatrix  
understand about her family’s  
status and history? Nothing was kept  
secret from her or revealed to her;  
the things she put together were both more  
than wanted, and less than at any rate  
Henry had feared. It was from Henry’s fears  
that Beatrix learned things most. To learn,  
meaning at once to *be passive* and to  
*be feared*, to have a power never, at  
the same time, under her control or in  
proportion to any detail of herself,  
became a transcendent appetite . . . .<sup>17</sup>

I gasped for air and read again. “It is from Henry’s fears that Beatrix learned things most.”<sup>18</sup> Three years of therapy seemed to have taught me as much about my childish psyche as one line from Eve Sedgwick’s awkward Victorian poem. I was in awe. Even more so after reading her description of how the child’s fledgling desire for power was channeled into a desire for knowledge. “To learn, meaning at once to be passive and to be feared.” What an insightful capturing of the experience of knowledge! “To have a power never, at the same time, under her control . . . became a transcendent appetite.” Surely, Eve has personally known me. My child-self felt naked

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> GREY GARDENS (Portrait Films 1976). Grey Gardens is a 1976 documentary featuring the impoverished aunt and cousin of Jackie Kennedy living in squalor in what used to be an upper class East Hampton mansion. In one scene, the mother (“Old Edie”), who used to have professional performing aspirations, sings “Tea for Two and Two for Tea . . . don’t you see how happy we would be” in what I found to be an unbearably poignant close-up, contrasting and/or blending fantasy and reality. The film was part of the Family Law Summer Camp program.

<sup>17</sup> SEDGWICK, *supra* note 3, at 180.

<sup>18</sup> In Sedgwick’s poem Henry is Beatrix’s father, a previously wealthy man who has fallen into disgrace and poverty because of his relationship with Beatrix’s mother, who, according to Sedgwick, is “almost a whore.” *Id.* at 178.

in front of her, in awe of her own powers of knowing in general, and of knowing me personally.

Nonchalantly interspersed throughout the text were nuggets of psychological insights that took my breath away. I recognized them as painful insights into my own psyche; the process of recognition having been so arduous that it had taken me years to even embark on it, and here she was, an author merely three years older than me, who seemed to be ages ahead of me in emotional perception and analytical power. She wondered, for instance: "Isn't anger almost necessarily the most diachronic, the most narrative of emotions, the one most *necessarily* mistranslated in the freeze frame?"<sup>19</sup> How could she have come to such a profound observation and such a personal one at that?! Anything that came inside her parentheses sent me reeling: "[T]he spanking in my imagination (I can only barely stop myself from saying, the spanking that *is* my imagination) . . . ." <sup>20</sup>

Similarly, her insights into children's psyches and into the fundamental misrecognitions between parent and child were profoundly moving:

The aptitude of the child's body to represent, among other things, the fears, furies, appetites, and losses of the people around it, back to themselves and out to others, is terrifying perhaps in the first place to them, but with a terror the child itself learns with great ease and anyway with a lot of help.<sup>21</sup>

I found myself identifying with the objects of Eve's inquiring gaze. What I really wanted, however, was to be able to identify with Eve herself, to feel that "my transcendent appetite to know" had at its disposal powers of observation and analysis as fearless and fearful as hers. All I could do, however, was feel my child-self naked in front of an all-powerful parental figure, who could at any moment unleash rage and anger, resignified as parental love.

#### PLEASURE AND ENVY

Pleasure and envy appeared together as I slowly started to realize, from the second reading on, the multiple different levels at which Eve was—successfully—operating in this text. The conceptual beauty of her enterprise gave me pleasure and sent me down the path of envious desire for her skills.

On a first level, there was the description of a nine-year-old's discovery of enjambment, the straddling together and pulling apart of lines in a poem for an effect of discipline, decision, control of self and others. Eve retraced her first discovery of the style in a poem by Louis Untermeyer contained in a children's poetic anthology. She then let the reader in on her fascination

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 196.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 183.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 199.

with the style, which she associated with her experiences of spanking in yet another “theater” of a family, this time her own:

[T]he lyric poem known to the child as such by its beat and by a principle of severe economy . . . was both the spanked body, my own body or another one like it for me to watch or punish, and at the same time the very spanking, the rhythmic hand whether hard or subtle of authority itself. What child wouldn't be ravenous for dominion in this place?<sup>22</sup>

Enjambment then started appearing in her own baby-step poems because it allowed for her the “careful . . . orchestration of spontaneity and pagantry”<sup>23</sup> that recreated and resignified the spankings of her own childhood. The humiliation and pain of a child's nude posterior was channeled into the poetic text, which could itself be disciplined and humiliated, spanked by the author who was now reclaiming some of her lost control:

Among the powers to be won was the power . . . to *identify with* [the body of one's own humiliation], creating with painful love and care, but in a temporality miraculously compressed by the elegancies of language, the distance across which this body in punishment could be endowed with an aura of meaning and attraction—across which, in short, the *compelled* body could be *chosen*.<sup>24</sup>

In more of Eve's words, the stylistic character of enjambment bore a “family resemblance to the power, rage, and assault that parents present to the child with a demand for compulsory misrecognition of them as discretion and love.”<sup>25</sup>

So there it is. Those of you who thought that an essay on “spanking and poetry” was nonsensical stop reading this and please go and read Eve's essay. It's even more compelling than I can possibly convey here by cannibalizing her words.

And all this conceptual and literary intricacy that I gestured towards was simply the first level at which this essay operates. Upon my second reading, I was stunned to realize that Eve was performing her preferred style; she was performing enjambment, in the text itself, even as she was diligently working to explain how and why she chose it as her favorite style. Indeed, my initial anger seems to have partly come from my experience of enjambment, from her sudden change in tone and theme, a straddling apart of the text, which produced a disciplining effect: “No, you really don't know where this is going, and if you keep reading this casually you will never get

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 184.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 187.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 184.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 187.

it,” I imagined her telling me. It is partly the performance of enjambment in the text itself that forced me to give up my control and submit to Eve’s literary spanking, convinced that it was for my own good. The first time she did it was precisely at the moment when she introduced the idea of enjambment:

. . . I was genuinely in love with something in this poem: it gave me power, a kind of power I still feel . . . . The name of that power—I know it now, and I knew it not long after I got this anthology at age nine—is, enjambment.

Or maybe we should go back a bit.<sup>26</sup>

After which she started talking about her childhood spanking, regaining control over the ultimate experience of loss of control in her childhood, by violently taking control of the reader’s gaze to force it into the family tableau of spanking.

Here’s another example, again made when describing enjambment in her own fledgling poetry:

. . . The thing in this embarrassing poem that to me now spells a certain resistance and heroism, though, the real place of challenge both to the static *blason* of female beauty and to the petrifying *tableau* of punishment, is the new presence in the poem, also from Untermeyer, of enjambment.

All this childish French.<sup>27</sup>

And she kept doing it.<sup>28</sup> Just when I thought I had a hold on what it was exactly that she was doing, she straddled the paragraphs and themes apart, leaving me at the mercy of her (it is now me who can barely stop herself from saying, parental) guidance.

This was not all, either. There’s a third level at which Eve was operating and that consisted of a narcissistically self-conscious commentary on her own literary performance only paragraphs later, noting the traces of the style she was describing in her writing, *as* she was writing it. Here’s an example: Eve noted that the characteristic of her preferred style seemed to be a certain presentation of a piece of writing as having gained or exercised control over “some earlier, plurivocal drama or struggle.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the stylistic performance is one that creates enough distance between the past drama or struggle to convey a sense of controlled coolness. And instead of referring us back to her childhood or early adulthood poems to illustrate, as she had done previously, she quoted instead Eve Sedgwick from a few pages ago

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 182.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 185.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, I think she does it again right after the last sentence of the first paragraph on page 195, changing the subject abruptly: “Let me, however, retreat from that simplified trajectory . . . .” *Id.* at 195.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 187.

referring to her childhood spankings as the “careful . . . orchestration of spontaneity and pageantry.”<sup>30</sup> This phrase first appeared on page 183, as Eve was describing her parents’ attitude in her childhood spankings. The second time it appeared when Eve was commenting on the phrase itself, putting it inside quotation marks, and thus revealing that particular phrase itself as the “careful orchestration of spontaneity and pageantry”<sup>31</sup> that allowed the Eve of *A Poem is Being Written* to present herself as having gained valuable distance from the “earlier drama” of spanking.

Pleasure and envy again emerged together as I slowly realized that this was not simply a text—if a text can ever be simple. It was more like a painting, and a self referential one at that. One watched the painter paint a tableau of herself painting a tableau, that contained herself painting a tableau. The image that came to mind was M.C. Escher’s sketch of the hand that comes out of the frame to draw another hand drawing the original one. Even though in Eve’s case the endeavor had the feel of a gradual undoing, a gradual deconstructing and unveiling of the different layers of herself that she has encrusted in this text. A hand was coming out of the frame to take away one layer, which then revealed another hand, taking off another layer.

STIMULATION: LETTING GO OF “KEEPING MY ASS COVERED”<sup>32</sup>

Eve’s gradual Escher-like unveiling of herself reached a critical point, a crescendo of sorts, in the final pages of the essay where she decided to address a fundamental misrecognition in herself, her identification as a gay male. She described the teen Eve Kosofsky as she struggled to fit her anal pleasure into some frame of reference and ran up against the absolute lack of any discourse descriptive of female anal eroticism. Other sites of women’s pleasure, such as the vagina or the clitoris, she noted, “do *mean* even when they don’t mean well.”<sup>33</sup> What she described was a huge “vacant space”<sup>34</sup> in public discourse, which led the young Kosofsky to identify as a gay male. This orientation was enriched by the erotically dense story of her beloved French teacher who had been arrested for having homosexual sex, conveyed by Eve’s mother as Eve was taking a bath, Beatrix-like. Eve’s identification became more solidified through the pleasures of knowing the story and telling it to astounded children of embarrassed parents. The crescendo came to a sudden end, that felt like enjambment again, when Eve avowed herself too

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 187, 183.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 183, 187.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 211.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 205. For an argument that the clitoris as a site of women’s sexuality “has not meant well” in general and within law itself, see Susan Frelich Appleton, *Toward a “Culturally Cliterate” Family Law?*, 23 BERKELEY J. GENDER, L. & JUST. 267 (2008); Susan Ekberg Stiritz, *Cultural Cliteracy: Exposing the Contexts of Women’s Not Coming*, 23 BERKELEY J. GENDER, L. & JUST. 243 (2008).

<sup>34</sup> SEDGWICK, *supra* note 3, at 206.



tired or too entangled in the narrative to continue “keeping her ass covered”<sup>35</sup> by presenting a narrative that looked as if it was superseding in a linear way all these earlier struggles, while performing them in the meantime.

This sudden end brought me back to the initial sense that there was something very special about this text. I knew that reading this essay felt like Eve Sedgwick had just done something with me or to me; I just didn’t know what exactly—until I read the postscript that launched me into my own narcissistic recounting of this encounter. I realized that to attribute my pleasure to mere admiration of Eve’s theoretical and literary skills would be to try to keep my own ass covered. In fact, I was titillated and aroused by her discussion of, desire for, and reclaiming of women’s anal pleasure in a manner that was much more than voyeuristic. It was more like Eve was right there (hence the singular of familiarity) engaging in a sadomasochistic erotic relationship with me through the text, letting me think I had control and then withdrawing it, spanking me and then consoling me through the obligatory resignification of her violence as love. Her degree of control over me was unbearable and extremely pleasurable at the same time. This control clarified the nature of my encounter with her and helped account for the intense repression that only allowed me to think clearly about and construct this narrative at the ultimate moment before the conference; to wit, I finished reading the text and it felt like I had just had sex with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

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<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 211.

