Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet

Jason Edwards

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Chapter 6

Waiting in the Dark: Some Musings on Sedgwick’s Performative(s)

Meg Boulton

This chapter was originally given as a paper at the Fat Art, Thin Art symposium held at the University of York on February 14, 2014, placed into the ‘Autobiographies’ section of the day. It is only now, only later, with the benefit of that oft-cited lens — hindsight — that the date seems a particularly apposite one, although I suspect it was anything but an arbitrary choice. So much of what was said that day was said with such emotion in the close quarters of a room full of people that seemed uncommonly close to each other and to the material they were presenting (although, in several instances, many had only just met) that it feels, now, improbably difficult to produce a written record of my part in that particularly lovely and particularly unusual academic event, and yet what follows is my effort to do just that.

As with the paper delivered on the day, it seems fitting to start with the barest of biographical outlines. In giving this paper, it felt, somewhat, like I was speaking from a mostly amateur place, spending my days researching things and themes that exist, mostly, far from Sedgwick’s queer world and writings. My doctorate was awarded in Art History and my day-to-day research is concerned with space, with its conceptualisation and significance, and I should also confess that it quite frequently takes
place in an Anglo-Saxon crypt in Northumberland. However, in this case, at this time I am writing about two of the poems in *Fat Art, Thin Art*: ‘Performative (Toronto)’ and ‘Performative (San Francisco)’. While reading this, I hope you will forgive me the (inevitable) liberties taken, not least the conflation of these two poems, which doubtless deserve to have been considered individually, rather than as I have addressed them.

Now, given that I am currently talking at some remove from Hexham and the seventh century and that I was helpfully placed in the ‘Autobiographies’ session of this event, I thought, maybe, I would start by writing about how I first came to read Sedgwick and, perhaps, how I read her now. As with many things, I have Jason Edwards to thank for an introduction to Eve, both in text and in person. My first encounter with Sedgwick, with reading Sedgwick, with struggling to think through the many complexities and intricacies, binds and double-binds, alley-ways and avenues, and openings her work presents was an immersive encounter more akin to an imagined group therapy than the usual module one expects and encounters in a post-graduate seminar.

For eight weeks, a group of six, then five, met in a small room, tiny really, for two hours and talked about one Sedgwick monograph or edited collection a week. Now, as I gave this paper I imagined, rightly or wrongly, that everyone in the room was familiar with trying to read that dizzying prose for the first time, and I imagine most readers of this, too, will share that experience — although, during these various imaginings, imagine, please, the amplified dizziness of moving from thesis to theory, to prose, to poetry, to art in such a condensed period. Today, six or so years later, I can only recall that module as an inti-

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3 For a quasi-voyeuristic encounter with this period of Sedgwickian discovery, do read the acknowledgements in Edwards’ introduction to her work in Jason Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (London: Routledge, 2009), xi.
mate blur of words, hers and ours, of terms, and thoughts, and fleeting ideas, of fragments and moments and bits and pieces. Of lists! More than remembering those days and texts in detail, I remember other things so clearly. I remember learning to read her. I remember learning how to read her. I remember it was easier to unpick her words, her thoughts on a bed or, more likely in a nest-like slump, piled in a soft heap on the floor. Surrounded by soft things it was somehow easier to find some space to think my thoughts, as well as hers. I remember that it was easier to read her in company, exclaiming in pleasure or pain, frustration or panic at particular words, or phrases, or books. Or, all of those.

Even today, Tendencies (1993) unnerves me.

Given this is how I have chosen to start, this may perhaps have been a more fitting part of the ‘Memories’ session, rather than strictly, precisely, autobiography. However, with the things I would remember about that time, that class, those people, there are also things I would forget. Six years ago, I learned how to begin reading Sedgwick. Six years ago, I also learned that things you think are permanent often aren’t. People come, and they go. In every sense. Six years ago, I put her work aside to focus on other things, other places, other eras. Academically, I was seeing other people.

And then, this. An invitation to go back, to revisit, to rethink. To re-inhabit.

To reverse?
No, that last, impossible.
Still, Irresistible.

And so, here I am. And this is, I think, what I want to say… I want to talk about Goodbye. Goodbye in our vocabulary.

Eve’s Performative(s) in Fat Art, Thin Art, ‘Performative (Toronto)’ and ‘Performative (San Francisco)’, are the two poems that immediately called to me when Jason asked what I wanted to speak on, for reasons I still can’t fully articulate. There are things here that I don’t know. There are things here that I don’t want to know. Ever.
Everyone who reads Sedgwick, everyone who reads Eve, struggles, I think, to define ‘hers’ and ‘mine’.\(^4\) Worse still than reading is writing (and by worse I might mean better). Impossible for writing on Eve to \textit{not} be a derivation, a reclamation of sorts, of her words, that have come and gone before. But in these poems, these performatives, there is a common act, a repeated phrase, an implicit leitmotif that is shared socially and societally. Both, hers and ours. Mine.

So, Goodbye.

Goodbye in our vocabulary is impossible.

The shaved disyllable — Good. Bye. The flagrant implausibility of these two conjoined words existing to form one impossible utterance — except, it is all too possible, isn’t it?

We say it. But we don’t mean it.

Some of us don’t say it.

The rest of us don’t mean it. Can’t mean it.

To borrow her questions here, as well as her words, as Sedgwick wrote with Andrew Parker in the \textit{Introduction to Performativity and Performance} (1995): “When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something?”\(^5\) When all is said and done, Goodbye, for the most part, when said is not done, equating more to little lies, polite fictions, social contracts than to saying, to doing what is meant, than believing what is called into being by those words, that phrase.

Yet, although it is a polite, politic everyday ending: it is said, it is done and oh, how it wantonly highlights the fragility which lurks beneath the everyday; revealing the finite versus the infinite; the possible rather than the probable; the wolf in bed, in frilled cap, at Grandma’s house, waiting just around the corner, through the woods, down the garden path. A day to walk through the woods, to find just one modest flower besides a modest road, less travelled.


Enforced, policed, polite, pedestrian utterance.

Reading the ‘Performative(s)’ captures, fiercely, some of the difficulties of goodbyes—not least the difficulties of our goodbyes and of goodbyes that are not obviously ours. In writing this I had such a fear of appropriating the goodbyes of others. Of hers.

Her Good-byes, preserved on the page “flooding out, unstanchable”, highlighting

The long moment
The long moment of no more
The long moment of no more Goodbye

Waiting in the dark morning

And later…
The horror in the taxi.


And, to this, to these Goodbyes, Sedgwick attaches the idea of the Performative—and a specific geography in her presentation of them in *Fat Art, Thin Art*, which, taken together, may be read as mapping a personal, emotional topography, goodbyes stretching across cities, countries, oceans. Across time. This connecting in her titles of place and performativity highlights, for me, the fallacy of Goodbye. The presentation of a place, a confining encircling physical location as a background for this act, this utterance, is interesting. To go back to basics for a minute, and to revisit various definitions of the Performative:

Performativity is the process by which semiotic expression produces results or real consequences in extra-semiotic reality, including the result of constructing reality itself.

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Performatives are always already situated within larger social contexts.

Performativity problematizes notions of intention and agency. Performative utterances (or performatives) are defined as sentences that are not only passively describing a given reality, but are changing the (social) reality they are describing.

Goodbye, then, to me, makes little sense as a performative. It is, I think, for most of us an utterance that we deny even as speak it; indeed, in speaking it, we negate its meaning rather than seek to enact it. Goodbye as a performance, maybe, but a performatives?

Goodbye could be thought of as a performance we never want to happen.

Goodbye is a safety net uttered like a prayer, like a curse. Goodbye, in most of its daily usage is made to mean, take care — I love you — be back soon.

We say goodbye, but we mean — see you soon, see you later, until next time, see you... again.

_Au revoir, auf Wiedersehen_, not Goodbye.

Constantly trying to make the word mean what we want it to mean, emboldened by each successive utterance that really embodies a future return, not a parting, as promised. As threatened?

If, then, the juxtaposition of this performative utterance described in ‘Performative (Toronto)’ and ‘Performative (San Francisco)’ is deliberate — that the Goodbyes here, are just that, a word that calls into being a state; the moment where meaning is truly meant;

“Does it feel to you like we are saying goodbye?”

But we were trying: we hugged each other, and for a while we cried...

then they are set against the physicality of place. They are not left to lie on the place/non-place of the page but realised in named cityscapes, in solid actualities, in darkened mornings and cars and taxis, set against personal geographies and lived contexts.
A performance generally involves an audience, and here these private goodbyes are preserved on the page, monumentalised and memorialised. They provide two brief encounters, her memories, our monuments, which perform and enact this utterance, driving its meaning home through her, to us; in our vocabulary.

The two Performative poems, located next to each other in the text, back to back, are presented separately, treated slightly differently, yet in my mind, even when keeping their individual natures clearly in mind, they are hard to separate. They pack a punch, these poems, excruciating in their proximity, highlighting and foregrounding the ‘Goodbye’ that for so many of the poems in the first half of the book is implicit, is subtext. Here it is direct, unavoidable; underlined by the double utterance of poems in proximity and our participatory, readerly performance of turned pages to encounter first one, then the other. Goodbye, goodbye.

Despite this proximity and their (inter)relationality, no two goodbyes are the same and some of the differences between the two are worth a closer look, separated, as they are, by no more and so much more than the turn of a page. In ‘Performative (San Francisco)’, for example, Goodbye is capitalized and this is a bloody parting; snapped off; broken; waxy; vengeful; flooding out, un staunchable; clotted gouts and gouts of blood, with horror, still to come in the taxi after that long moment; spaced out, separate, further down the page. The nuanced line break, too, of that long moment of no more Goodbye in our vocabulary speaks, perhaps, to the suggested disjunction of meaning and moment; the difference of words and meaning, and the impossibility of Goodbye meaning goodbye, either in its everyday usage in our vocabulary or of its meaning at all in that moment, that long moment of no more Goodbye, because here is the last, and here, it must mean what we say, what she says, what is said. ‘Performative (Toronto)’ also directly employs the word goodbye, but here, it is not capitalized and, instead of the horror, instead there is hugging and crying and giggling, absurdity, vitality, a decision, denial…
“Oh, honey, denial’s gotten us this far”.

But then, at the close, is one of the mysteries of *Fat Art, Thin Art* — and I can’t go any further without thanking Jason for conversations about this, past and present — we arrive once again, here, in ‘Performative (Toronto)’ at the missing fourteenth line from the sonnet… present by its absence in ‘Performative (San Francisco)’, a sonnet forever incomplete, a facet found throughout Sedgwick’s poetry, but that here, forcibly underlines the incompleteness offered by goodbye. Then, too, both poems leave with a sense of motion, of going on, of work, of locomotion, of movement, of a continuing. Life goes on. Until, of course, it doesn’t and then we all must confront a wider loss, a more personal moment of goodbye.

Reading her today, these days, is, I suspect, for me, like for many, somewhat of a constant goodbye, an unending ending unfolding the beginning of an ending of a page, of a book, of an era, of a voice. Of Eve. As I implied at the outset of this paper, there were a lot of endings caught up in the beginnings of me discovering her work. And my relationship with her work, never simple, is nuanced with these endings. Reading her, now, feels uncertain, like a renegotiation of meanings. Yet the act of reading, too, is not a performance necessarily bound by endings. To open, to turn, to turn, to turn again, to close, only to reopen. But perhaps this is just a part of growing up; of keeping on… small endings of beginnings, beginnings of endings. Perhaps, in the space of these texts, in these poems, in these pages, in the papers so carefully and kindly delivered on the fourteenth of February, in a treehouse in a university in York we might find that there is room, there is breath for more than one type of goodbye. Performance, performative, utterance.

Does it feel to you like we’re saying goodbye?

Goodbye in our vocabulary; it’s gotten us this far.