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SHAME NOW: RUTH LEYS DIAGNOSES THE NEW QUEER SHAME CULTURE

J. Keith Vincent

From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After by Ruth Leys. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 216. $25.95 paper.

In *From Guilt to Shame,* Ruth Leys follows up on her earlier work on the genealogy of trauma studies by tracing the emergence and eventual discrediting of theories of survival guilt since the end of World War II.[1] In the process, she tells a fascinating story of a gradual shift in trauma studies away from psychodynamic theories that emphasized the subject's uncontrollable mimetic identification with the aggressor towards anti-psychoanalytic understandings of purely external stressors and traumatic images as the causes of trauma. In the book's latter chapters, however, the focus shifts to a critique of recent work in affect theory, including a highly problematic reading of the work of the late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Leys interprets the work of Sedgwick "and her followers" not only as a further development of the anti-psychoanalytic tendencies that have conspired to discredit the diagnosis of survivor guilt, but also as symptomatic of a larger, culturewide shift "from guilt to shame," away from "questions of agency and responsibility" and towards what she misleadingly characterizes as a disengaged and solipsistic focus on identity. Since the publication of this book in 2007, Leys has continued to mount similar critiques, both of Sedgwick's work and of the whole enterprise of shame-based affect theory. This review attempts to address that critique as it appears both in *From*

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Guilt to Shame and in an interview and article that have appeared in the interim.[2]

First I should make it clear that Leys's book does provide an impassioned, and I would say important, defense of what she calls the mimetic school of trauma theory. In this way of thinking, traumatic experiences are marked and exacerbated by uncontrollable identification and merging with others, sometimes even the aggressor responsible for causing the trauma. The founding instability of the subject that this reflects is one of the most fundamental tenets of psychoanalysis, so it is easy to understand why Leys, as a thinker with a strong psychoanalytic bent, might be critical of the attempt to replace it with antimimetic theories like that of Terrence Des Pres and others for whom the cause of trauma is understood as entirely external to the subject and "uncontaminated by any mimetic, fictive, or fantasmatic dimension" (15). The importance of survivor guilt to Leys has to do with the fact that we experience it over actions that occur *only* mimetically and in fantasy (like our "murderous" wish that someone else would die in our place), so it serves as a sort of proof of the mimetic theory of trauma. As she puts it, "[T]he concept of survivor guilt is inseparable from the notion of the subject's unconscious identification with the other" (10). Our ability to feel guilt over crimes we have not actually committed is a sign of the permeability of the subject and its vulnerability to immersive mimetic identification and the sway of fantasy. Another way of saying this would be that the notion of survivor guilt is incomprehensible without a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity. So the denial of survivor guilt is tantamount to the repudiation of psychoanalysis. One goal of Leys's book, then, is to remind us of the psychoanalytic insight that we can think and desire things in our unconscious that we would find morally repugnant in our waking lives, but that this does not necessarily make us complicit with evil.

In chapter 4, however, which she describes as "arguably the heart of my book," Leys moves into more problematic territory. Here "the theme of trauma . . . recedes," and she draws a connection between the antimimetic critiques of survivor guilt and contemporary shame theory, which she sees as having "taken the place" of survivor guilt, replacing its "intentionalist paradigm" with an "anti-intentionalist" and "material" one (16). In Leys's narrative, the rejection of survivor guilt gives rise to a culturewide preoccupation with shame as "a dominant emotional reference in the West" (4). She portrays this shift "from guilt to shame" in alarmist terms as a shift "away from questions of human agency" (150), leading to "an impulse to displace

questions about our moral responsibility for what we *do* in favor of more ethically neutral or different questions about our personal attributes" (131; emphasis in original), and she predicts that the displacement of guilt with shame will lead to a sort of narcissistic quietism that entails nothing less than "giving up disagreement about intention and meaning" (13).

This represents a crisis for Leys. But rather than discuss this supposed shift in the same psychoanalytic terms she used to critique antimimetic trauma theory, Leys resorts to decidedly unpsychoanalytic notions of individual agency and responsibility to sound her warning. Whereas in chapters 1–3 she advocates a complex and rigorously psychoanalytic understanding of the psyche and critiques what she calls a "quasireligious idea of a conscience" (66) in the work of Terrence Des Pres and "more traditional notions of individual responsibility and consciousness" (14) in the work of Robert Lifton, in her treatment of shame theory in chapter 4 she seems almost to be channeling Des Pres and Lifton, becoming herself a defender of moralistic notions of personal responsibility, agency, meaning, and intentionality. The question arises, why does Leys feel the need to portray the recent upsurge in interest in shame as the consequence of the rejection of survivor guilt and to do so in such alarmist, moralizing terms that seem so at odds with her sophisticated psychoanalytic critique of antimimetic trauma theory in the book's earlier chapters?

Shame Theory, Identity, Subjectivity

Despite Leys's argument to the contrary, shame theory (especially Sedgwick's) cannot be grouped alongside or seen as a logical development of those antimimetic theories that see trauma as a "purely external event that befalls a fully constituted if passive subject" (9). Shame may be about "who one is" more than "what one does," but that does not mean that shame theory assumes the existence of a "fully constituted subject." In Sedgwick's work, shame is "not at all the place where identity is most securely attached to essences, but rather . . . the place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally."[3]

Sedgwick *is* interested in identity and she sees shame as a crucial mechanism of its constitution, but this does not mean that she sees shame as an "attribute of personhood" (131) as Leys claims. The phrase "attribute of personhood" suggests a static understanding of the self that reverberates instead with Leys's own condescending judgment of what she seems to see as the naïve identitarianism of shame theory (and implicitly of

queer theory). Leys's work, in other words, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of queer theory and the queer critique of identity. This is made very obvious early in chapter 4 when she describes Sedgwick's work as being "focused on questions of queer identity, not trauma" (125). Anyone who has read any of Sedgwick's work (see especially her classic essay "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay") knows that, for Sedgwick, (a) being queer *does* constitute trauma in a heteronormative society and (b) *queer identity* is an oxymoron since *queer* is a term invented precisely in order to critique and deconstruct *identity*.[4]

Queer theorists like Sedgwick might use the term *queer* to modify *people* now and then, but they are always careful to insist that queerness does not designate any stable set of subjective experiences or any easily defined demographic group. Often Sedgwick put it in scare quotes to signal that it is far from a self-evident term, or even in parentheses *and* scare quotes in moments when she might seem to be suggesting otherwise, as when she writes that "at least for certain ('queer') people shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity" (64).[5] Needless to say, Sedgwick's own position as a "straight" woman who considered herself queer made her exquisitely aware of the shifty malleability of the term. But Leys uses "queer identity" quite unproblematically as if it were a synonym for "gay" or "lesbian" identity. In the absence of any discussion of what exactly Leys herself means by "queer identity," we are forced to assume that she sees queerness as another one of those (or perhaps even *the* prototypical) "personal attributes" that shame theorists want to focus on solipsistically.

It is remarkable that Leys says almost nothing about the context of Sedgwick's work on shame. Leys does describe her as a queer theorist but does little to explain how that might inform Sedgwick's interest in shame. At one point, Leys writes, "Normally we cannot be held responsible for who we are in the same way we can be held responsible for what we do—or what we *imagine we have done*" (131), after which she proceeds to explain how guilt and survivor guilt inevitably entail questions of responsibility and agency while shame is "the affect of disempowerment" (132). But this distinction between what you do and who you are is, in the case of queer theory, not at all one that can be taken for granted in the way that the word "normally" in this sentence so blithely suggests. As Sedgwick taught us long ago, the distinction between "conduct" and "status" is nothing less than a constitutive double bind for queer-identified people. "Normal" people (the "we" of Leys's sentence) may not be held responsible just for *who* they are, but minorities of all kinds

certainly have been and in many respects continue to be shamed for who they are. The oppression of queer-identified people derives its energy, moreover, not just from shame but from a constant "heads-I-win–tails-you-lose" shifting back and forth *between* guilt and shame. This is made clear in the endless "nature vs. nurture" debates about what makes people gay, or lesbian, or transgender, or otherwise queer. If being queer is a choice, then you're guilty for having made it. And if it's a biological condition, then we ought to find a cure! If guilt is about "conduct" and shame is about "status," it is the double bind between them that is especially relevant to the experience of queers. Or, rather, the specific way in which shame *and* guilt interact around queerness is itself constitutive of the experience of being queer. So no wonder Sedgwick, as a queer theorist, was interested in joining this debate.

Leys writes that Sedgwick is interested in shame because it is a "technology for creating queer identity as the experience of pure difference" (154). This is a very extreme way of describing what is actually a very nuanced idea with which Sedgwick does smart and beautiful things in her writing, including the notion of the "nonce taxonomy" with its tension between unclassifiable uniqueness and rigorous systematicity.[6] With the phrase "queer identity as the experience of pure difference," however, Leys produces a caricature of Sedgwick's interest in difference, reducing it to the level of a simplistic fixation on "personal identity." Sedgwick's emphasis on the ways in which people are different from each other was never about passive resignation to the status quo or a navel-gazing interest in "personal identity." It was a way of combating a cultural order that she saw as aggressively, and sometimes murderously, enforcing consensus and uniformity. Far from being a way to avoid conflict or ignore "meaning and intention," it was a way to explore the most subtle *and* extreme forms of difference. This is not at all "ethically neutral." It is the hard work of ethics. Her interest in shame stemmed from a deep interest in what it feels like to be minoritized. And while she was really, truly, respectfully interested in how people are different from each other, she also wanted to understand how the majority is constituted by exploiting, distorting, and *ignoring* these differences.

Objectless Emotions

Another aspect of Sedgwick's work that worries Leys is the way in which shame theory and other affect theory supposedly strips the emotions of their "meaning" and their proper objects. For Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, affects

are distinguished from the drives by their ability to attach to any kind of object. So while hunger, for example, has food as its only object, interest, enjoyment, rage, or shame can be felt in relation to all kinds of objects, including other affects. This lack of an intrinsic connection between the affects and their objects means that they are much *freer* than the drives, and for both Sedgwick and Tomkins this is what accounts for the extraordinary richness and malleability of human motivation and experience. For Leys, however, this same *freedom* of the affects sounds impoverishingly arbitrary because it

> makes it a delusion to say that you are happy because your child got a job, or sad because your mother died, for the simple reason that your child's getting a job or your mother's death are merely triggers for your happiness or sadness, which are themselves innate affect programs that could in principle be triggered by anything else. (147)

This move is typical of Leys's somewhat exaggerated rhetorical strategy. Just because there is no *necessary* connection between an affect and its object does not mean that there is no connection at all or that once that connection is formed it does not have any meaning or intentionality. But be that as it may, in order to understand why this theory of affects might be appealing to Sedgwick, we have to see her work within the context of the longer history of queer theory. In her interest in the freedom of the affects, Sedgwick is actually following the lead of Freud, who first decoupled the object from the "aim" of sexuality in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), arguing that they were not connected by any natural necessity, but "merely soldered together."[7] By denying any intrinsic connection between the aim and the object of the libido, Freud was able to denaturalize heterosexuality, a crucial first step in the theorization of sexuality. "From the point of view of psychoanalysis," he wrote, "the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature."[8]

The affects, of course, are even freer than the Freudian libido, which is one reason why affect theory is so appealing to Sedgwick. Leys follows Sedgwick up until this point, recognizing her appreciation of the lack of instrumentality and freedom of the affects as a way to critique the Freudian *repressive hypothesis,* according to which all human behavior is to be explained by the pulsations of a single, end-oriented libidinal drive. But she draws the line at Sedgwick and Tomkins's claim

that this freedom of object choice also implies that the affects can be autotelic in nature. "I consider this a mistake," she writes: "It doesn't follow that because the affects can have a multiplicity—even a vast multiplicity—of objects they are inherently without any relation to objects whatsoever. The mistake, in other words, is thinking that having multiple objects undoes objectality altogether." This is another huge leap. It is one thing to say that there is no inherent or intrinsically necessary relation between an affect and its object, or even that affects can be self-amplifying (hence *autotelic*), and quite another to say that this "undoes objectality altogether." Leys puts the ostensibly disturbing conclusion to be drawn from this "mistake" in italics: "In short, *for Tomkins and Sedgwick the affects are nonintentional states*" (135).

It is by no means clear that Sedgwick and Tomkins would actually go so far as this. But it is clear that the idea make Leys very nervous. The nightmarish conclusion that she draws from it is that Sedgwick's "theory of affect therefore appears to give primacy to the feelings of a subject without a psychology and without an external world" (148). For Leys, the idea that affects would not *mean* anything leads straight to a world where people are content just to *feel* their differences from one another rather than argue over them, where the universal and the true are eclipsed by the particular and the subjective, and the reader's interpretation matters more than the author's intention. In other words, she sees shame theory like that of Tomkins and Sedgwick as partaking in a (for her, dystopian) postmodern worldview. Not surprisingly, she cites Walter Benn Michaels here on the "end of history" and the "posthistoricist valuation of identity" and suggests that this is where Sedgwick's work is leading us.[9]

I am not in a position to judge whether Leys's claim that the work of Tomkins and others such as Paul Ekman on the universal and innate (rather than culturally determined and cognitively driven) nature of the affect system on which much of Sedgwick's work is based is scientifically inaccurate. It must be said, however, that for Sedgwick it matters much less whether it is right or wrong than whether it is useful and productive as a theoretical paradigm—whether it is "good to think with." As Leys also points out, Sedgwick is quite open about her own position on this. She called it

> moving from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true? and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do?*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge one already knows? *How,* in short,

> is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?[10]

It may be simply that the performative effect and value of affect theory in the context of literary studies, where it is not in the majority, is different from its effect and value in the context of psychology, where it is. Leys wants to back up her own position with the authority of scientific proof when in fact it seems that she herself may be motivated to defend the guilt side because she prefers to "think with guilt." Rather than being up front about this, however, she appeals to the authority of science.

* * *

But what is really a shame about Leys's book is its refusal to engage with shame theory, especially *queer* shame theory on its own terms. She is so intent on recounting her own narrative of cultural decline from guilt to shame that she misses almost everything that is valuable about what these writers are doing. One has the sense in reading her work that she is simply not interested in it. In a recent interview, she was asked a question that, despite its potentially ominous implications, might actually have led in a productive direction. That question was "How would your emphasis on guilt alter our understanding of the construction of queer identity?" Leys responds by saying, "[A]t least it would make questions of meaning and agency of central interest because . . . guilt is tied to the question of one's (real or imagined) intentions to act in a certain way, whereas shame shifts attention from questions of agency and meaning to questions of personal identity."[11]

It is hard to determine precisely what Leys is suggesting here, although one might be forgiven for thinking that she is saying that queers are somehow evading responsibility (for their queerness?) by focusing too much on shame and too little on guilt. And yet she hastens to add that she is not completely rejecting the "relevance of shame" either. She assures us later in the same paragraph that "nothing I say critically about shame theory today is meant to reject the view that shame may be an appropriate response to certain situations." The wording here is nothing short of bizarre—as if the question ever was, or ever could be, whether or not shame was appropriate.

For myself, as a queer theorist and a scholar of Japanese literature, I cannot help but be reminded in reading Leys's work of the tired and (one thought) discredited arguments that anthropologists used to make about so-called shame culture versus guilt culture. This argument, which formed the backbone

of one of the most devastating forms of Western Orientalism, was most famously put forth in Ruth Benedict's wartime book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), a work that, as Marylin Ivy has recently put it, "produced Japan as a 'shame culture' for American delectation." Benedict argued (without ever visiting Japan) that the Japanese had no sense of self strong enough to experience guilt—the latter being the hallmark of more "advanced" Western cultures. As Ivy puts it, in Benedict's book,

> Ashamed, shame appears as less developed, less autonomous, less evolved than guilt. Shame is felt always in relation to the Other, unlike guilt with its sturdy, consistent standards of morality (guilt is confessable). Shame is more primitive. Shame allows the most heinous deeds, and all is well, as long as these crimes are not exposed to the gaze of the world. Guilt does not depend on crime's revelation. Guilt is internalized, autonomous; shame is externalized, heteronomous. Guilt is fixed; shame is mutable. Guilt is American; shame is Japanese.[12]

Leys herself cites Benedict's work and the notion of shame cultures completely uncritically at the beginning of chapter 4, which tells the alarming story of what she calls "shame's revival."[13] So for Leys, it would seem, we are all in danger of turning Japanese. But it is simply wrong to characterize the rise of an interest in shame among queer-affect theorists as what Leys describes as "a means of avoiding the moralisms associated with the notion of guilt." This makes it sound as though "Sedgwick and others" are somehow trying to get away with something that is morally suspect. In my view, and I think in Sedgwick's, guilt and shame are not so easily separated, and certainly not useful in isolation as descriptors either of entire cultures or whole historical moments, be they Japanese or queer, then or now.

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NOTES

1. See Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
2. Leys is apparently at work on a book-length critique of affect theory, which she has previewed in this recent interview and article: Ruth Leys, "Navigating the Genealogies of Trauma, Guilt, and Affect: An Interview with Ruth Leys," interview by Marlene Goldman, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 2

(2010): 656–79; and Leys "The Turn to Affect: A Critique" *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434–72.

3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel,*" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity,* Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–65, quotation on 37.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies,* Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 154–64.
5. Sedgwick, "Shame," 64.
6. On this, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* Centennial Books (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 22–23.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays of the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 7:123–245, quotation on 148.
8. Ibid., 146.
9. See 154–56 for the discussion of Walter Benn Michaels.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (see note 3), 123–51, quotation on 124.
11. Leys and Goldman, "Navigating the Genealogies," 677.
12. See Marylin Ivy, "Benedict's Shame," *Cabinet* 31 (2008): 64>N>68, accessed 16 April 2012, http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/index.php.
13. In *From Guilt to Shame* Leys writes "Benedict emphasized the public dimension of shame, its dependence on external rather than internal (or internalized) sanctions, and the absence of confession and atonement in shame cultures" (123fn2).