

## Addiction/Epidemic

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Central to a workshop on bodily autonomies is the persistent tension between autonomy as a politically necessary aspiration and autonomy as a harmful ideological fiction. Organizers invited participants to test out these divergent conceptions of autonomy in a range of contexts: chattel slavery, sexual violence, reproductive justice. For my part, I wondered: to what extent and in what ways is it useful to think about addiction as an autonomy problem? What, in turn, can addiction and its cultural representation teach us about the necessity—and the shortcomings—of autonomy as a regulative ideal?

It is perhaps not customary, or at least not comfortably idiomatic, to understand addiction in relation to autonomy. More familiar is the equation of addiction with dependency, which implies that the normal or healthy condition with which it is contrasted is a state of independence. Independence is defined negatively, first and foremost, by opposition to what it is not: it is the condition of not being dependent. As such, independence, unlike autonomy, makes no secret of the thing it is haunted by: the embarrassing fact of dependency it attempts to repress or transcend.

In its channeling through the language of dependence, addiction brings the concept of autonomy closer to the body. At the same time, as Eve Sedgwick argued in her 1992 essay “Epidemics of the Will,” critical scrutiny of addiction troubles the boundary between ostensibly normal dependencies and pathological attachments, shining a spotlight on the former. The idea of attachment as always potentially diseased (excessive, compulsive) reminds us of our ordinary, inevitable entanglements: in food and energy systems, in a consumer economy, in networks of care.

The first part of my contribution to this year’s workshop was a reading of Sedgwick’s essay. My guiding question: what’s at stake in Sedgwick’s use of the rhetoric of contagion (“epidemics”) in an essay that only glances at the AIDS crisis while pointedly ignoring the contemporaneous panic over crack cocaine? By way of answer, I sought to amplify the importance of recovery in Sedgwick’s analysis. If the idea of contagion troubles the concept of the individual as a self-contained steward of her own health, then the discourse of “twelve-step and twelve-step-like programs”<sup>1</sup> works as a kind of figurative inoculation, relieving pressure on individual moral choice and psychopathology alike.

What, then, of the eighteenth century? In turning to Daniel Defoe’s 1724 novel *Roxana* in the second part of my paper, I queried the degree to which Defoe’s protagonist’s commitment to her own independence comes off as excessive, disordered—indeed, addicted. Is she a test case for what Jennifer Fleissner, quoting Sedgwick, describes as the “possibility...for ‘the assertion of will itself’ to take the form of an addictive behavior”?<sup>2</sup> In Sedgwick’s account, this recursive structure is specific to late capitalism. It is the “propaganda” of free will turning in on itself; speaking figuratively, it is a kind of autoimmune disorder of the will. But in order to have a concept of the exertion of willfulness as “an addictive behavior,” you must first have the addiction concept in place—its conventional version, modeled on substance abuse. Attending to the eighteenth century, I argue, has the potential to reverse this logical trajectory. Using

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will: The American Novel and the Modernity Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 290.

addiction as a framework for thinking about eighteenth-century narrative means separating addiction from substances—more specifically, imagining an account of addictive psychology, an addictive theory of character, that is historically prior to a conception of the addictive substance.

Like Defoe's other major works, *Roxana* is distinguished by its retrospective first-person narration; its protagonist analyzes her own sinfulness as a pattern of compulsions, unmet intentions, and failed abstinence. Defoe's confessional novels share with twelve-step recovery discourse an origin in spiritual autobiography; both model a narrative cure for disordered desire. *Roxana* is especially noteworthy in that one trespass much regretted by the protagonist is a compulsive attachment to her own independence (manifested as a resistance to marriage, a resistance that looks unreasonable only in retrospect). Sedgwick's analysis helps us make sense of the elusive object of Roxana's compulsion, which, as her first-person narration makes clear, is neither sex nor money. There is no substance or behavior that, in fantasy (or brain chemistry), makes this subject feel complete or functional or euphoric. Rather, the desired, magical object is her own (aspirational, impossible, projected) self-coherence—call it will or will power, call it independence, call it autonomy. This, it seems to me, is the problem at the heart of *Roxana*, and it is a gendered problem (for a male subject, the same desire for autonomy might be valorized as a Stoical principle).

Reading *Roxana* through the lens of addiction suggests that Defoe and Sedgwick may be, each in their own way, framing a similar problem: that a major threat to autonomy—to the fantasmatic experience of autonomy as well as to its conceptual coherence—is one's very attachment to the idea of autonomy.