

# *Sontag, Osiris*

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In almost every review of her work, Susan Sontag is described—often from an early photograph or piece of film, and sometimes from life—floating into functions, aware of the daunting, sometimes ungenerous esteem in which she was held. A nagging aspect of her legacy is the tendency of critics to draw her as a priggish moralist, or simply to draw her; her critical and political work is nearly overshadowed by a relentless invocation of her own appearance, the by now clichéd “white swoosh” of forelock. If she at one time seemed hip, able to capitalize on that glamour, she was never able to stay hip, or to lighten up enough to remain unassailably cool. Daphne Merkin conjures Sontag’s startling presence in a *New York Times* book review:

From the start, Sontag was different from Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt and the other bluestockings who preceded her, in part because of the oracular, aphoristic quality of her prose, and in part because of her ability to strike a camera-friendly pose. It didn’t hurt that she was darkly beautiful, with a sensuous mouth, a thick helmet of hair and a direct, wide-set gaze. Or that well before the Age of Prada she outfitted herself in chicly underdesigned clothes and shades of black. (Elizabeth Hardwick, in her

introduction to “A Susan Sontag Reader,” suggests that Sontag “is herself a sort of pictorial object, as the many arresting photographs of her show.”<sup>1</sup>

Later, Daryll Pickney similarly recounts her bold presence in a review of her early journals written for *The New Yorker*:

She was beautiful and hip, a princess of high bohemia, intimidating, free, and, incandescently, always *on*....I don't remember when the signature white streak began to appear in her lustrous, abundant hair, but I think of her as someone who went out dressed in her fame, like a great scarf thrown over the shoulder at the last moment. And I must admit that, when we became friends, I was far too pleased to be seen with her.<sup>2</sup>

There's something to be said about the irresistibility of describing Sontag—the power she had as a physical person, as Pickney suggests, someone who wore her admiration, and who in the most casual gesture, defined herself. It's this physicality—the body and its possibility of incandescence, the body as the defining moment, the source of knowledge, the ultimate work—that holds Sontag's critical practice and political activism together, and while her legacy seems divided between that of a brilliant mind but an intemperate, foolhardy activist, or a that of a great activist with a strange penchant for little-known European artists, there is always the body of Sontag—the physicality of her—that finds itself invoked in nearly every review, whether admiring or dismissive. There's a way in which the body asserts itself so formidably in Sontag's work that even after her death, Sontag's legacy seems willed by her, something still very much in her hands. After her death, it seems impossible to know how to contain her.

Interestingly, with the release of her journals in three volumes, of which *Reborn: Early Diaries 1947-1964* and *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980* have now been published, images of her body have and will continue to force her body to resurface for our scrutiny. In at least two reviews of *Reborn*, Sontag's notes-to-self are nothing but earthy: “Don't gossip, don't brag, don't complain, bathe regularly, write more, eat less.” As with Warhol's tabulations of cab fares, we will know a great deal about Sontag by

the time all the diaries are released. And like Warhol, our sense of this artist's brilliance will always be dogged by a chink in character, by Sontag's quirky desire to be both a popular artist and to offer a critique of populism.

In the recently released memoir by Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, readers are once and for all disabused of any illusion that Sontag was not active in the construction of her most defining characteristic: that white swoosh that seemed a birthmark of austere genius. Nunez writes about their first meeting: "Her skin was sallow, and her hair—it would always bewilder me that so many people thought she bleached the white streak in her hair when it should have been obvious the streak was the only part that was its true color. (A hairdresser suggested that leaving one section undyed would look less artificial)."<sup>3</sup> Obviously schooled in the Decadents, Sontag can be imagined quickly embracing the idea of artifice as being somehow more easily perceived as natural. At that time, those binaries—the natural and artificial—were less contested.

Before *Reborn* was released, David Rieff, Sontag's son and the editor of her diaries, wrote a moving, traumatized account of her death by leukemia. Rieff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death* is a strange book. It's hard to tell whom he attempts to humanize—himself or his mother (he manages, surprisingly, to do both)—but he reveals little of Sontag's "personality" or his own for that matter, providing instead a portrait of silences, uncomfortable topics that hang in the air between mother and son (and probably more often than not the living and the dying) that were rarely broached, but might have been (this nags at Rieff throughout the account, and appears to be the impetus behind it). The memoir is so repetitive, so suggestively clumsy, that one wonders if it will ever begin to approach its subject. It does magnificently, but really only at the point of Sontag's protracted, agonized death, when she is weakened, out of fight, and suddenly unable to get what she needs—more time, more life—from friends and family, doctors, or by the most invasive medical treatments available. It is only after the dire chemotherapy and obliteration of Sontag's immune system that Rieff seems able to approach his mother's bedside and look upon her, a victim of her own wishful thinking, her tenacious grasp on life (the other side of life—the unthinkable—was "extinction," "nothingness," in Sontag's words). This commitment to surviving the impossible odds she

faced with leukemia was one of the crueler benefits of Sontag's earlier experience with having beaten breast cancer—especially at a time when cancer was stigmatized and believed incurable. Survival endowed her with what might be considered a hard-won sense of exceptionalism. Rieff states, “She reveled in *being*; it was as straightforward as that. No one I have ever known loved life so unambivalently.”<sup>4</sup>

It may be that any real evaluation of Sontag's legacy as both a critic and activist should emerge from this insistence upon *being*. Perhaps, we won't glean more “objectivity” about her work by forcibly paring away her iconic status from her texts (if that were possible), and perhaps there is no greater nobility to her critical and activist position than the position she took on her deathbed, sublimating all comfort and reason for the narrow chance at survival. I would posit that any understanding of Sontag's uniquely American contribution to the role of “public intellectual” arrives from her embattled corporeal ontology—her criticism and her activism are determinedly concerned with moral action; she is not hindered by the myriad questions of agency, but rather, focused on a practicable discernment of moral action: *How might this metaphoric understanding of the problem make things better or worse? Can we afford to be flip in these times? Can we ever dispense with relativism? Is moral judgment always contingent, or might the moral have to exist outside the contingent?* This is where Sontag is determinedly *not cool*, and where her American pragmatism can make her appear less rigorous or less conceptual than the international theorists whose work she often admired, and who more willingly embraced decentered and multiple concepts of agency: feminist, post-ontological and networked theories of the “self.” Sontag, on questions of biopolitics and the cyborg body, would inevitably disappoint.<sup>5</sup> Her presumption of an ethics that could trump historical relativism—let alone the buzzing drone of a permanent online present—is implied: a moral imperative should be an artist's first commitment, not a secondary concern. While toward the end of her life many disciplines and theories of art were adopting interpenetrating dialogues and for the most part promoting an entirely post-humanist theoretical approach, Sontag seemed to be getting simpler, more populist, and ever more political in her approach. She is remembered for many things, but

perhaps will never be forgotten for her brief essay in the *The New Yorker* written two days after September 11, 2001. What she wrote is still—this many years later, through two wars (if we accept the new moniker “Af-Pak” to mean a single war waged in two nations)—considered provocative. Her words stung not only because of their timing—so close to the event—but because they ask Americans to do what most are uncomfortable doing: admit that our foreign policy of the past 50 years has been a failure. Sontag was also calling on Americans not to allow the future course of events to be controlled by televised, sentimental punditry—common sense, in other words. In either case, after the George W. Bush years, her vigorous attempt to slow the train of warmongering seems eerily prescient now:

The disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a “cowardly” attack on “civilization” or “liberty” or “humanity” or “the free world” but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word “cowardly” is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday’s slaughter, they were not cowards.<sup>6</sup>

This isn’t great writing. Some would still see this as “blaming the victim.” But it is not mincing words, nor obfuscating its intentions. It is a simple call for Americans to take an honest inventory of their role in the world, and not to allow the yet-to-be constructed metaphor, “war on terror” to drive us lockstep over the precipice. Still, over the precipice we dropped. It will be other theorists who will determine whether drone strikes are cowardly, or at least as asymmetrical as the methods of warfare we find so amoral in our foes.

I mention this—Sontag’s brief, angry critique of America—to return to the very qualities I think define her as an American artist and intellectual: pragmatism in the face of devastation, blunt considerations, even bullying—but here, and always in Sontag, the forcefulness of her rhetoric stands in defiance against the easiest assumptions, the rapid loss of individual thinking that can occur in any crisis. The criticism this 9/11 commentary unleashed—and continues to unleash—is also distinctly American in its underlying assumption: the notion that a theorist is not a politician and therefore has no place in the making of practical things, useful statements. The trouble with Sontag is that she was a bit of what everyone loves separately, but not together: a literary star—glamorous, immediately recognizable; a real thinker (as opposed to a polymath)<sup>7</sup>; a generous critic; an activist. She was also a filmmaker and novelist. In America, these identities don’t sit well together. In fact, they are often seen as incompatible. Partially, this is because art is rarely seen as connected to moral or ethical discourse, and partly because discourse is rarely seen as connected to actual practice (our democracy is marked, almost always, by a whittling away of pesky ideals to arrive at pragmatic ends—so theory, morality, ethics have become, like the fine arts, inessential, marginal practices—inept, bloodless—which is why it surprises us when they are potent, bloody).

And yet, Sontag’s most popular writings are not about some little-known masterpiece of film or literature, but photography and disease. These books, *On Photography* (1977), *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), really did reach people and influence thinking. That photographs were not recorded truth and that disease was not a manifestation of stress or, in the case of AIDS, God’s wrath, were radical thoughts in their time. Ultimately, Sontag was best known for her work on quotidian subjects—her critical acts were intended as works of intervention, reform. Both subjects—photography and disease—directly impact how we perceive and experience the world. They circumscribe, intensify, distort, and reconfigure our relationship to the human body. Photography and disease test our ethics; reframe our relationship to nature, our opposition or ambivalence toward it. They also quicken or deaden our response to our own history and to the observed world. They extend what we conceive of us as our history: photography allows us to lay claim to our past, and therefore our present experience;

and disease, of course, intervenes in that claim.

How we construct metaphors was central to Sontag; as well as how metaphors can stigmatize, become vehicles for our own sense of dread, our fear of mortal processes out of our control. In her most influential books, she grapples with the mediation of technology in how we observe and attempt to reconcile the limits of the body. She addresses the rapaciousness stoked by the photograph—rapaciousness for experience without presence, the process of personalizing and consuming images as one's store of lived experience.

She drew a clear distinction between *lived* experience and information—a distinction not common to many contemporary theorists. In a 1974 interview with Geoffrey Movius,<sup>8</sup> she clarifies why photography compelled her as a subject:

...because virtually all the important aesthetic, moral and political problems—the question of “modernity” itself and of modernist “taste”—are played out in photography's relatively brief history. William K. Ivins has called the camera the most important invention since the printing press. For the evolution of sensibility, the invention of the camera is perhaps even more important.

In the same interview she provides an account of how photography has changed our relation to the world, as well as our comprehension of history:

By giving us an immense amount of experience that “normally” is not our experience. And by making a selection of experience which is very tendentious, ideological. While there appears to be nothing photography can't devour, whatever can't be photographed becomes less important. Not only do we know the world of art, the history of art, primarily through photographs, we know them in a way that no one could have known them before. Photographs convert works of art into items of information. They do this by making parts and wholes equivalent. The camera elevates the fragment to a privileged position. In this way, photography annihilates our sense of scale. It also does queer things to our sense of time. To be able to see oneself and one's parents as children is an experience unique to our time. The camera has brought people a new,

and essentially pathetic, relation to themselves, to their physical appearance, to aging, to their own mortality. It is a kind of pathos that never existed before.

From the earliest point in her career, it was clear that Sontag's primary concern was in attacking the methods whereby we appreciate or dismiss the experience of art based upon how well we identify with it, how easily it's assimilated. This accounts for the "militant"<sup>9</sup> position Sontag assumes in her early essay: "Against Interpretation" (1964).<sup>10</sup> This essay establishes Sontag's opposition to the personalization of art, to the appreciation of art as a telegraph with an encoded message. Part essay and part manifesto, "Against Interpretation" is a defense of art against its would-be clarifiers, its vivisectionists:

Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The aim of commentary on art should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

Rarely has anyone attacked Sontag's denunciation of what today we would call the "democratization" of art—the fact that the photograph can be taken by anyone, held in the hand, captured by a phone, never printed and yet disseminated. There is a kind of unimaginable immediacy in the passing of images that doesn't comport with Sontag's early writing. Today the photograph sits



squarely in the arsenal of identity, created with the instantaneity of thought, uploaded to personal profiles, an indication of an individual's tastes and obsessions, a method of creating and projecting the "self." The "self" is merely an editor—not of experience—but of the *taste for images*. And Sontag, writing primarily in the late '60s and '70s during a period of energized cultural production and radicalized aesthetics, as an American preoccupied with what it meant to be an American, found herself at war with what she diplomatically called "philistinism." In fact, she was a partisan in the ideological battle against American, media-constructed and -defined "democracy." There was great reason to doubt technological innovation then as there is now, but it's no longer hip to express that distrust. Critique of media is only acceptable if one is a step ahead of it; otherwise, it risks becoming a relic akin to Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* or Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Technologies—once exterior and "created"—are now interior and inchoate as consciousness itself. The camera, as Sontag notes, was the apparatus by which "self" and "other" became perpetually distinguished. The power of the image, Sontag wrote, was in how efficiently it could be consumed and assimilated. But since the publication of *On Photography* that assimilation has become total. Today, a more appropriate metaphor for the camera would be the self—as Warhol once cryptically suggested.

Sontag was predictably reviled for her reductive assumptions about the function of the photograph and the public's reception of the medium. Her concerns, throughout her career, were almost entirely about figurative photographs, and not photographic processes. And yet almost none of her adversaries have associated her critical project with her politics (a specifically human concern)—what she prefers to call her "moral" vantage. She was fiercely opposed to the association of technology with consciousness, with moral rectitude. Technology, Sontag reminds us, is never neutral or without agenda. The camera is not a witness, but a creator of realities. It has moral rectitude in the hands of those who recognize its power; it can be quite dangerous in unconcerned hands.

For Sontag, few people understood the responsibility that had to be employed in the use of such instruments. Her "elitism" was a stand against coercion, a championing of artistry over amateurism, ultimately a warning against the subjectivity abetted by technology:

Many people don't believe that one can give an account of the world, of society, but only the self—"how I saw it." They assume that what writers do is testify, if not confess, and a work is about how you see the world and put yourself on the line. Fiction is supposed to be "true." Like photographs.<sup>11</sup>

Sontag—like John Berger—exemplifies the effort to challenge what mystifies us about art. But Sontag does this through a repudiation of analytic readings (by this I mean the assumption that a text must be "unpacked"), of rummaging depths, of creating anterior texts, in favor of pursuing the secrets of surfaces, the inherently persuasive and often dangerous power of forms. As a critic during the structuralist and post-structuralist periods, Sontag took the difficult position of assuming that moral consideration was essential to the creation and critical evaluation of art. Sontag's ethics derive from her awareness of being an American, the specific negotiations and considerations required of being from and living in a world superpower. That was a demand she tried to foist on Americans after 9/11, but also a responsibility she carried throughout her life. Sontag's essays never mythologize America, address it as a construct, an ideal, or an ideal gone wrong. It is always a political power—a hegemonic force, an act of prodigious self-assurance and belief—armed to the teeth.

There were other origins, besides her sense of being an American, of Sontag's pragmatism. The gravity of the Holocaust is inscribed in her critical sensibility, as is her experience with cancer. To put these two experiences together seems arbitrary—too closely linking the personal and historical for an artist who eschewed sentiment and carefully evaluated the scale of events—but Sontag was compelled to examine the impersonal impacts of both, or rather, the depersonalizing aspect of war and disease.

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In her 1965 essay, *On Style*,<sup>12</sup> Sontag lays out the foundations by which she will confidently assume an historical and moral reading of works of art. According to Sontag, it is art that provokes the sensibilities needed for moral consideration and choice:

It is sensibility that nourishes our capacity for moral choice, and prompts our readiness to act, assuming that we do choose, and are not just blindly and unreflectively obeying. Art performs this “moral” task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life.

...Morality, unlike art, is ultimately justified by its utility: that it makes, or is supposed to make, life more humane and livable for us all. But consciousness—what used to be called, rather tendentiously, the faculty of contemplation—can be, and is, wider and more various than action. It has its nourishment, art and speculative thought, activities which can be described either as self-justifying or in no need of justification. What a work of art does is to make us see or comprehend something singular, not to judge or generalize. This act of comprehension accompanied by voluptuousness is the only valid end, and sole sufficient justification, of a work of art.

What is wanted by such a vantage point is that it do justice to the twin aspects of art: as object and as function, as artifice and as living form of consciousness, as the overcoming or supplementing of reality and as the making explicit of forms of encountering reality, as autonomous individual creation and as dependent historical phenomena.

Though Sontag credits Ortega y Gasset in partially developing her argument, it is Edward Said who, in his essay *Labyrinth of Incarnation*,<sup>13</sup> best identifies Sontag’s philosophical maneuver. Said associates Sontag with Merleau-Ponty, and almost all of Said’s summaries of Merleau-Ponty’s thought are essential supplements to any reading of Sontag. Said writes:

Truth, [Merleau-Ponty] concludes, is based on what is real—and that is our perception of the world: perception becomes “not presumed true,” but may be “defined as access to truth.”

“...human reality can best be understood in terms of behavior (action given form) which is neither a thing nor

an idea, neither entirely mental nor entirely physical.

And quoting Merleau-Ponty:

The experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the task of knowledge and action.

Given Sontag's early assertions that art is directly connected to moral action, it is surprising to find that her outspoken political views have yet to be seen as an extension of her aesthetic approach. Moreover, considering Sontag's writings on cancer and AIDS, torture, the war zones of Hanoi and Sarajevo, on fascism, totalitarianism, and on genocide, it is surprising that no one has yet attempted to observe (without judgment) her "activist" positions with the nuanced stance she advocated for our engagement with works of art and literature. And yet Sontag's highest ideal as a critic was certainly to promote consideration, to inspire the careful acknowledgement of scale, and to draw attention specifically to the impositions of the metaphor and the photograph, two of the most powerful means by which experience is now defined as true, as given or having presence.

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Consider her highly regarded essay on Leni Riefenstahl published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1975.<sup>14</sup> The essay, entitled "Fascinating Fascism," begins with a review of Riefenstahl's photographs documenting the Nuba tribe of Sudan. Sontag's critique begins with a scrupulous correction of the information provided in *The Last of the Nuba's* introduction and dust jacket. The "self-vindicating" and "rehabilitating" biographical notes on (and possibly by) Riefenstahl are full of what Sontag calls "disquieting lies."

But Sontag has her sights on something other than merely clarifying Riefenstahl's record, taking to task the renowned Nazi filmmaker (*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*) for her collaboration

with the Nazis, and the role her films had in not only recording Nazi events, but staging them, helping to provide and distill and disseminate that particular vision of power:

What is interesting about the relation between politics and art under National Socialism is not that art was subordinated to political needs, for this is true of dictatorships both of the right and of the left, but that politics appropriated the rhetoric of art—art in its late romantic phase.

Sontag—in the prescient, inimitable way she had of selecting subjects and articulating points about them that would later be seen as definitive—identified what we continue to refer to as the fascist aesthetic: notably, work that depicts or glorifies repressed sexuality, transforming that repression into a supposed spiritual force put into the service of the community.

It is not only Sontag's ability to offer pertinent analyses of highly specific aesthetics (she is also well known for bringing a gay aesthetic into the wider public domain with her famous essay of 1964, "Notes On Camp"<sup>15</sup>) that is worthy of reconsideration. Her profound ability to parse what aesthetics imply—what values they engage, what potential dangers they impose, what misconceptions they engender—exemplifies Sontag's greatest gifts as a moral philosopher and critic.

"Fascinating Fascism" argues a very important point, and one that may help dispel, or at least clarify, Sontag's elitism, her commitment to canonical high culture. Her position, in this regard, was really a refutation of *faddism*, of the idea of history as a continual supplanting of previous values, the idea that greater justice and inclusiveness is available only through the burying or augmenting of the past, or by shaming the past. This, it seems, had become a function of criticism, an agenda, and Sontag renounced it.

Sontag discerns how Riefenstahl's portraits of the last remaining Nuba in Sudan are in fact characteristic of the aesthetics of the Reich. Riefenstahl's hopelessly ennobling portraits of these proud natives are a reiteration of the fascist aesthetic in which self-control and submission are the signs of a pure, unifying, communal dignity. Sontag offers an incisive evaluation:

Riefenstahl claims to have arrived “just in time,” for in the few years since these photographs were taken the glorious Nuba have been corrupted by money, jobs, clothes. (And probably war—which Riefenstahl never mentions, since what she cares about is myth not history.)

More important to Sontag than Riefenstahl’s consistent and enduring Nazi aesthetic is the way in which a fascist aesthetic continues to assert itself in new forms and “under new banners”:

The ideal of life as art; the cult of beauty; the fetishism of courage; the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders).

The list catalogs what Sontag would—for the entirety of her writing career—position herself against.

But the most important, and perhaps least discussed, of Sontag’s “salutary lessons” in her lengthy critique of Riefenstahl’s book is not directed at Riefenstahl at all. Rather, it’s directed at those who prefer to see Riefenstahl’s work through a purely formalist lens. It is the cynical arbiters of culture for whom Sontag saves her harshest criticism. For those wishing to consider Riefenstahl’s images solely on the basis of their compositional beauty—their idealized stasis—divorced from the history of propaganda, Sontag warns:

Without a historical perspective, such connoisseurship prepares the way for a curiously absentminded acceptance of propaganda for all sorts of destructive feelings—feelings whose implications people are refusing to take seriously.

Sontag then makes a profound distinction—and ultimately defines the responsible spectatorship essential to her methodology and moral vision:

The hard truth is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established. Taste is context, and the context has changed.

Sontag asks that those concerned with culture rise to the ethical demands of the age, that those imbued with the power of discernment deploy it. Sontag tasks the intellectual with caution, with considering the impact of their aesthetic indulgences, their quips and easy aphorisms, their infatuation with what she calls “facile transposition and the making of cheap equivalences.”<sup>16</sup> Sontag recognizes that a certain balance must be achieved and vigilance maintained in order to avoid simplistic moral dicta. Art must have a rigor besides being “right.” In her 1963 essay “Camus’ Notebooks,”<sup>17</sup> Sontag writes, “A writer who acts as a public conscience needs extraordinary nerve and fine instincts, like a boxer. After a time, these instincts necessarily falter. He also needs to be emotionally tough.” In writing on Camus, Sontag outlines the pitfalls awaiting any artist’s undertaking of exemplary political sympathies:

Neither art nor thought of the highest quality is to be found in Camus. What accounts for the extraordinary appeal of his work is beauty of another order, moral beauty, a quality unsought by most 20th century writers. Other writers have been more engaged, more moralistic. But none have appeared more beautiful, more convincing in their profession of moral interest. Unfortunately, moral beauty in art—like physical beauty in a person—is extremely perishable. It is nowhere so durable as artistic or intellectual beauty. Moral beauty has the tendency to decay very rapidly into sententiousness or untimeliness.

Sontag points out Camus’s inability to take a position on the French occupation of Algeria, and writes tartly: “Moral and political judgment do not always so happily coincide.” And, in a great leap—and almost as autosuggestion—Sontag observes: “Camus’ life and work are not so much about morality as they are about the pathos of moral positions.”

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It is this awareness of the pathos of moral positions that enables Sontag to avoid the prescriptive dogma of what writers must or must not do—what their modes of engagement should or should

not be. Her embrace of artistic approaches is expansive, and when judgmental, she is cautiously and justifiably so. The justification is always clarified, never a “going after,” and never without a careful assessment of an artist’s choices: what they chose to demonstrate or produce, and what they chose to withhold or omit.

In her lengthy 1982 essay on Roland Barthes, “Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes,”<sup>18</sup> she concentrates her appreciation on Barthes’s “ethical character.” In a long, illuminating contrast of Barthes’s and Sartre’s work, Sontag elaborates the poles at which two of the century’s most important writers found themselves. Of Sartre, Sontag writes:

Riven by his love of literature (the love recounted in his one perfect book, *The Words*) and an evangelical contempt for literature, one of the country’s great *litterateurs* spent the last years of his life insulting literature and himself with that indigent idea, “the neurosis of literature.” His defense of the writer’s project is no more convincing. Accused of thereby reducing literature (to politics), Sartre protested that it would be more correct to accuse him of overestimating it. “If literature isn’t everything, it’s not worth a single hour of someone’s trouble,” he declared in an interview in 1960. “That’s what I mean by ‘commitment.’” But Sartre’s inflation of literature into “everything” is another brand of depreciation.

Barthes, too, might be charged with overestimating literature—with treating literature as “everything”—but at least he made a good case for doing so. For Barthes understood (as Sartre did not) that literature is first of all, last of all, language....Barthes preferred to avoid confrontation, to evade polarization. He defines the writer as “the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses”—the opposite of an activist or a purveyor of doctrine.

Barthes’s utopia of literature has an ethical character almost the opposite of Sartre’s....For Barthes, it is not the commitment that writing makes to something outside of itself (to a social or moral goal) that makes literature an instrument of opposition and subversion but a certain practice of writing itself: excessive, playful, intricate, subtle, sensuous—language which can never be that of power.



Barthes's praise of writing as a gratuitous, free activity is, in one sense, a political view. He conceives literature as a perpetual renewal of the right of individual assertion; and all rights are, finally, political. Still Barthes has an evasive relation to politics, and he is one of the great modern refusers of history. Barthes started publishing and mattering in the aftermath of World War II, which, astonishingly, he never mentions; indeed, in all his writing he never, as far as I recall, mentions the word "war." Barthes, who was not tormented by the catastrophes of modernity or tempted by its revolutionary illusions, had a post-tragic sensibility. He refers to the present literary era as "a moment of gentle apocalypse." Happy indeed the writer who can utter such a phrase.

Sontag could not. There are no gentle apocalypses in Sontag.

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It is perhaps presumptuous and simplifying to suggest that cancer, which Sontag had twice and ultimately succumbed to, may have heightened her sense of mortality, of the relationship of the body to the making and enjoying of art—and moreover, to the urgent, or what she called "serious" functions and implications of art. Certainly, *Illness as Metaphor* is not a book of theory, however well researched. It does not hold its subject at a distance, but reduces distance, pares away the popular beliefs that disease is retribution, a manifestation of God's disapproval, the consequence of a lack of self-care, and a sign of weakness. Sontag's aesthetic and moral positions did not generate from her experience of cancer; her sensibilities were established earlier than her diagnosis. But mortal illness is a frame, a condition in which one might move against platitudes, against sympathy, against "objective" wisdom and subjective subterfuge.

In many ways, Sontag undermined elitism by writing books that had such immediate and wide reception, that were so influential in changing, or at least challenging, people's deeply held beliefs. Eliot Weinberger, in a 2007 review of Sontag's posthumously compiled, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*,<sup>19</sup> does cite *Illness as Metaphor* as having "made a genuine difference in the world." Weinberger uses his review to evaluate Sontag's career and output; it may have been the first example of a critical assessment

of Sontag's legacy. But Weinberger insists upon seeing Sontag's criticism of the U.S. and Israeli occupations—her writing on these subjects is often hasty, often “slight” as he describes it—as generating from Sontag's celebrity rather than her critical positions. And his criticism of Sontag's use of the word “serious,” (and by suggestion, her seriousness) suggests that he has not paid attention to the continuity of the thoughts and concerns expressed throughout her writings on aesthetics.

For the preface to the 1996 republication of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag wrote “Thirty Years Later...,” an account of her own feelings on the 30th anniversary of the book's publication. Neither oblivious to nor dismissive of the praise and criticism she'd received during her stormy and very public career, Sontag acknowledges the cultural shifts that occurred over the span of her writing, and subjects her own work to the lens of history:

When I denounced...certain kinds of facile moralism, it was in the name of a more alert, less complacent seriousness. What I didn't understand (I was surely not the right person to understand this) was that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions. Thirty years later, the undermining of standards of seriousness is almost complete, with the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries. Now the very idea of the serious (and of the honorable) seems quaint, “unrealistic,” to most people, and when allowed—as an arbitrary decision of temperament—probably unhealthy, too.

I suppose it's not wrong that *Against Interpretation* is read now, or reread, as a pioneering document from a bygone age. But that is not how I read it, or...wish it to be read....The judgments of taste expressed in these essays may have prevailed. The values underlying those judgments did not.

It is worth revisiting those values, not merely to provide a more comprehensive idea of what Sontag's work accomplished—and what it aspired to—but to remind us of what is urgent. Eliot

Weinberger somewhat dolorously says of Sontag: “Arguably the most important literary figure or force of the last forty years, she may ultimately belong more to literary history than to literature.” But of course, Sontag’s appeal was to history, to the frame by which any artistic endeavor could find its moral relevance and application. She may have wished the act of writing to be free of such gravity, but her conscience, and her subject—which was always, ultimately, the treatment of the body—would not allow such indulgences.

## Notes

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3. Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, Atlas & Co., New York, 2011.
4. David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
5. Allison Fraiberg, “Of AIDS, Cyborgs, and Other Indiscretions: Resurfacing the Body in the Postmodern.” *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 1, no. 3, Johns Hopkins Press, May 1991.
6. Susan Sontag, “Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.
7. Christopher Hitchens, “Sontag: Remembering an Intellectual Heroine,” *Slate Magazine*, December 29, 2004. Hitchens relays a brief anecdote about a panel on which he saw Sontag and Umberto Eco: “Susan, pressed to define the word ‘polymath,’ was both sweet and solemn. ‘To be a polymath,’ she declared, ‘is to be interested in everything—and in nothing else.’”
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16. Evans Chan, “Against Postmodernism, Etcetera—A Conversation with Susan Sontag,” [www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/textonly/issue.901/12.1chan.txt](http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/textonly/issue.901/12.1chan.txt)
17. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*.
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19. Eliot Weinberger. “Notes on Susan,” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 54, no. 13, August 16, 2007.

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