

A CRITIC AT LARGE DECEMBER 11, 2017 ISSUE

THE OTHER SUSAN SONTAG

Her essays emanated authority, but her fiction betrayed an aching sense of uncertainty.

By Tobi Haslett

Seriousness, for Susan Sontag, was a flashing machete to swing at the thriving vegetation of American philistinism. The philistinism sprang from our barbarism—and our barbarism had conquered the world. “Today’s America,” she wrote in 1966, “with Ronald Reagan the new daddy of California and John Wayne chawing spareribs in the White House, is pretty much the same Yahooland that Mencken was describing.” Intellectuals, doomed to tramp through an absurd century, were to inflict their seriousness on Governor Reagan and President Johnson—and on John Wayne, spareribs, and the whole shattered, voluptuous culture.

The point was to be serious about power and serious about pleasure: cherish literature, relish films, challenge domination, release yourself into the rapture of sexual need—but be *thorough* about it. “Seriousness is really a virtue for me,” Sontag wrote in her journal after a night at the Paris opera. She was twenty-four. Decades later, and months before she died, she mounted a stage in South Africa to declare that all writers should “love words, agonize over sentences,” “pay attention to the world,” and, crucially, “be serious.”

Only a figure of such impossible status would dare to glorify a mood. Here was a woman who had barged into the culture with valiant attempts at experimental fiction (largely unread) and experimental cinema (largely unseen) and yet whose blazing essays in *Partisan Review* and *The New York Review of Books* won her that rare combination of

aesthetic and moral prestige. She was a youthful late modernist who, late in life, published two vast historical novels that turned to previous centuries for both their setting and their narrative blueprint; and a seer whose prophecies were promptly revised after every bashing encounter with mass callousness and political failure. The Vietnam War, Polish Solidarity, AIDS, the Bosnian genocide, and 9/11 drove her to revoke old opinions and brandish new ones with equal vigor. In retrospect, her positions are less striking than her pose—that bold faith in her power as an eminent, vigilant, properly public intellectual to chasten and to instruct.

Other writers had abandoned their post. So Sontag responded to a 1997 survey “about intellectuals and their role” with a kind of regal pique:

What the word intellectual means
to me today is, first of all,
conferences and roundtable
discussions and symposia in
magazines about the role of
intellectuals in which well-known
intellectuals have agreed to
pronounce on the inadequacy,
credulity, disgrace, treason,
irrelevance, obsolescence, and
imminent or already perfected
disappearance of the caste to
which, as their participation in
these events testifies, they belong.

She held a contrary creed. “I go to war,” she said a decade after witnessing the siege of Sarajevo, “because I think it’s my duty to be in as much contact with reality as I can be, and war is a tremendous reality in our world.”

Behind the extravagant drama, though, was a shivering doubt. Her work rustles with the premonition that she *was* obsolete, that her splendor and style and ferocious brio had been demoted to a kind of sparkling irrelevance. The feeling flared up abruptly, both when she was thrilled by radical action and when she was aghast at public complacency.

“**F**or Susan Sontag, the Illusions of the 60’s Have Been Dissipated”: this was the smiling headline for a profile of Sontag in the *Times*. The year was 1980, a hinge for her, and the article—by a twenty-five-year-old Michiko Kakutani—was occasioned by the release of “Under the Sign of Saturn,” Sontag’s fifth book of nonfiction. “Although she maintains that her current attitudes are not inconsistent with her former positions,” Kakutani wrote, “Miss Sontag’s views have undergone a considerable evolution over the last decade and a half.” The gruesome disappointment of the sixties’ militancy had sent shudders through the left-wing intelligentsia of which Sontag had once been a symbol.

So the *Times* piece presented a woman of dignified prudence, whose deviations are of the mature, domesticated kind. “The sensibility that resides in this particular town house is an eclectic one indeed,” Kakutani begins, as the piece swivels like a periscope to survey the gleaming appurtenances of the life of the mind: the eight-thousand-volume library, the idiosyncratic record collection, and the portraits of iconic writers who keep watch over Sontag’s desk like benevolent household gods—Woolf, Wilde, Proust.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

The American Opioid Crisis

And Simone Weil, the Marxist turned mystic who, during the Second World War, fled her native France and protested the humiliation of her countrymen by starving herself to death. In 1963, Sontag had begun an article on Weil, for the first issue of *The New York Review of Books*, with a thundering declaration: “The culture-heroes of our liberal bourgeois civilization are anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois.” So, at that point, was Sontag. Weil was a specimen, for her, of a fascinating species: the raving writer, the flagellant writer, the writer impaled on ruthless principle. “No

one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom,” Sontag wrote. “Yet so far as we love seriousness, as well as life, we are moved by it, nourished by it.”

To love seriousness was to quest for electrifying contact with spiritual and ideological extremes. The piece on Weil—a woman “excruciatingly identical with her ideas”—is a hymn to extremity. Extremity shone with the promise of transcendence, which is why Sontag strapped herself to the thrashing energies of the sixties. She was enshrined as an intellectual in revolt, unleashing her polemics on the repressive drabness of “our liberal bourgeois civilization.” Along the way, she learned, as she put it, “the speed at which a bulky essay in *Partisan Review* becomes a hot tip in *Time*.” The Weil essay, along with pieces on Alain Resnais, psychoanalysis, Camus, and Cesare Pavese, appeared in Sontag’s first essay collection, which in 1966 boomed cannon-like from the prow of the literary left: “Against Interpretation.”

It was crucial to be *against*: against fustiness, against the horror in Vietnam, against the leering excesses and calculated impoverishments of the global capitalist order. “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art”—Sontag’s phrase from the book’s title essay—is now imprinted on the public imagination because it sent the ecstasies of the youth movement hurtling toward the arena of aesthetic taste.

“Styles of Radical Will,” Sontag’s best book, was published three years later, and contained an essay on Godard in which she gave full-throated expression to the spirit of revolution that had swept up the poor, the dark, the sensuous, and the young. “The great culture heroes of our time,” Sontag announced, again, “have shared two qualities: they have all been ascetics in some exemplary way, and also great destroyers.”

This was in 1968—the year she flew to Hanoi and visited the Vietcong, publishing an account in *Esquire*. It was the apex of her militant commitment. Although she had long since turned up her nose at the “philistine fraud” of the American Communist Party, the North Vietnamese had inspired her, the struggle filling her mind with a vision of a changed world. “The Vietnamese are ‘whole’ human beings, not ‘split’ as we are,” she marvelled.

But, while she was being led around by terse, determined guerrillas, it struck her that her elaborate American appetites for rock and psychology and *The New York Review of Books* were marks of the very luxury she longed, in those days, to abolish. “I live in an unethical society,” she wrote in her journal,

that coarsens the sensibilities and thwarts the capacities for goodness of most people but makes available for minority consumption an astonishing array of intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. Those who don't enjoy (in both senses) my pleasures have every right, from their side, to regard my consciousness as spoiled, corrupt, decadent.

She yearned to be identical to her ideas, to display the punishing consistency of Weil, but her ideas jostled and sparked, exploding her sense of what she was, or wanted to be.

This season brings us a Sontag collection that scrapes through the varnish of her persona. “Debriefing” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), edited by Benjamin Taylor, gathers her eleven short stories. It also stages a coup. Sontag the fantastically assured “dark lady of American letters” is guillotined by Sontag the punk, Sontag the agitated diarist, Sontag the perplexed. Short fiction was never quite her form, and these stories see her lurching down the page. They catch her *between* postures, in moments of poignant psychological wobble. This isn't the majestic air of paradox that gallops through her writing on photography or Camus or camp but, rather, an aching, moving irresolution.

The private Sontag has, of course, already been thrust into the light by two volumes of her journals: “Reborn” and “As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh.” They expose her sincerity and self-doubt, and bare the homosexual life about

which she was so laboriously coy. And they furnish us with a fuller picture of her early life: the fatherless childhood in Arizona, the adolescence in Los Angeles, the precocity at the University of Chicago, and her marriage, at seventeen, to the scholar Philip Rieff. Then, there's the brooding, demanding, but, finally, astonishing woman of letters presented to us by a rising pile of remembrances, notably Sigrid Nunez's "Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag" and "Desperately Seeking Susan," a now iconic 2005 essay by Terry Castle in the *London Review of Books*.

"Debriefing" has a different appeal. The book lies somewhere between the bronze-plated imperiousness of her essays and the veil-yanking satisfactions of the journals. Raw, flailing feeling is pinched and styled, sometimes clumsily. The clumsiness is affecting. The satires here—"American Spirits," "Baby"—are failures. But in the sad pieces our dauntless aesthete offers us glimpses of her psyche, and of intelligent heroes melting into a sense of sophisticated futility and thwarted feeling. Here is a Sontag heaving herself through shredded political romances and sapped passions, applying her ardor to disillusionment and drift.

"Old Complaints Revisited," a story first published in 1974, portrays the agonies of flagging commitment: "I want to leave, but I can't. Each day I wake up and tell myself today I'll write a letter. No, better yet, I'll go around and let the organizer know in person that I'm resigning. My arguments are in order. I review them in my head." Anomie is not the problem. Attachment is. Our narrator is a servile participant in something called "the organization" but is on the brink of a traumatic break. Sontag pitches the "I" of the story against the shifting, anonymous mass of "the members," loyal adherents to an unspecified political ideology. There have been purges and treasons in the past; now what is demanded—and insidiously enforced—is discipline. That discipline is political, psychological, and likely pointless, "unless the organization was designed simply to demonstrate the power of human perseverance in the face of crushing obstacles."

But suffering within the organization rewards the sufferer with a perverse cachet. So a whole political insurgency trudges along, wincing beneath the whip of a relentless sanctimony. The narrator—whose gender is carefully withheld—admits "my wish to lead not just a good but a morally intense life," and we see that this is the damning little virtue that makes him or her so vulnerable to the tyranny of the group. This is a tight, asphyxiating seriousness. The narrator

had wanted to be a writer. Yet the organization promises a *purpose*: a chance to bring the political will and the starving spirit into shining, total alignment.

Sontag, glancing at Kafka, opts for allegory. She furnishes us with a model of how orthodoxy takes hold of the psyche and begins to twist. The narrator writhes within a fantasy of political commitment, though the political conditions are unripe. The dreamed-of reckoning is impossibly distant. So power is exerted almost entirely *within* the organization, among its pious militants, generations of whom have clung to their lovely discipline throughout a vast, indifferent history. A lesson flickers at the bottom of the fable. “Dissent must be set off from dissent,” the narrator says. “I dissent differently.”

The idea haunted her. Slung between aesthetics and politics, beauty and justice, sensuous extravagance and leftist commitment, Sontag sometimes found herself contemplating the obliteration of her role as public advocate-cum-arbiter of taste. To be serious was to stake a belief in *attention*—but, in a world that demands action, could attention be enough? (“I wanted to be useful,” she remarked of her 1978 book, “Illness as Metaphor.”) Because she had gone through the conflicts of the sixties, her instinct was to sprint to the barricades and decry quietism as complicity and contentedness as moral failure. This was the logic of movements, of course. But she would live to see them die.

“I don’t want to satisfy my desire, I want to exasperate it,” a character says in “Unguided Tour,” which appeared in this magazine in 1977. The story, which bears an open resemblance to the work of Donald Barthelme, is made up of dialogue between two nameless speakers, and rolls, with gloomy facility, from war to history to art. Love, as the opening lines make clear, throbs at the narrative center:

I took a trip to see the beautiful
things. Change of scenery. Change
of heart. And do you know?

What?

They're still there.

Ah, but they won't be there for long.

I know. That's why I went. To say goodbye. Whenever I travel, it's always to say goodbye.

We're instantly faced with a question of scale. How, Sontag wants to know, can the psyche manage its devotions—to love, but also to the immensity of the world? The problem intensifies, as private loss (“change of heart”) is stamped dolefully upon the landscape (“change of scenery”). Like actors in Godard, Sontag's characters speak a sighing, allusive language draped with erudition. The action here, if it can be called that, unfolds in a glamorously abstract, vaguely Continental universe: there's a dictator, a piazza, a war—and souvenirs, cathedrals, and the exiled leader of a Liberation Front. (When she later made a filmed version of the story—the fourth and last of her films—she shot it in Venice.) “The trial is next week, so now they're having demonstrations. Can't you see the banner?” But the political intrigue is muffled, distant, a chic ripple in sensibility.

These are privileged people. They ransack the planet in a ravenous search for stimulation, an act that churns experience to an exhausted, cosmopolitan sludge. They lament this. In their drained world, there's nothing but the memory of love, the memory of joy—and the memory, strangely, of a socialist hope. “We can march in their workers' festivals,” one says airily to the other, “and sing the ‘Internationale,’ for even we know the words.”

Even we know the words: political solidarity shrivels into pantomime. The gestures are wooden and rote. Intelligence has spent itself, plunging into a kind of spiritual insolvency. And history, offered up for the delectation of Sontag's protagonists, is revealed to be a miserable fetish, “one of the more disastrous forms of unrequited love.”

“Unguided Tour,” like “Old Complaints Revisited” and six other stories in “Debriefing,” were collected in the only other book of Sontag’s stories, “I, etcetera,” from 1978. The title is telling. So is the year. A decade had passed since the peak of the youth movement, with which she had declared a gallant sympathy. Many of these stories, then, are stalked by the memory of an age of revolution: the shrieking climax and thudding bathos, the militant action and miserable defeat, the struck postures and private sacrifice—all the desperate palpitations of a heart hurled at the world.

The final portrait above Sontag’s desk in 1980—hanging beside Woolf, Wilde, Proust, and Weil—was of the German Jewish writer Walter Benjamin, who sulks beautifully at the center of Sontag’s essay “Under the Sign of Saturn.” It is the key to “Later Essays” (Library of America), a new volume that collects her last five books, excepting the novels, and trembles with melancholy. Benjamin was loosely attached to the Frankfurt School: a coterie of Marxist scholars that included Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse (the last of whom shared a house with Sontag and her then husband in Cambridge, Massachusetts). The group rose to radical prestige in Weimar Germany by piercing the skin of bourgeois ideology with their glinting dialectical acuity. Soon they were forced to flee. Many of them settled at universities in the United States, but Benjamin, devotee of Baudelaire and translator of Proust, insisted on going to Paris—and died while escaping to Spain. “I felt I was describing myself,” Sontag told Kakutani about the Benjamin essay. “I’m trying to tell the truth, but of course I know I am drawn to the part of people that reminds me of myself.”

That part was probably Benjamin’s lavish intellectual appetite and tragic posture. His political intensity bloomed with feeling but also romantic contradiction; his writing revels in an astral sorrow. “I came into the world,” he once proclaimed, “under the sign of Saturn—the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays.” He struck Sontag as “fiercely serious,” and something like his tenebrous sophistication rolls through all her books. He was drawn to Communism but preferred reading poetry to reading Marx; flashes of him can be glimpsed both in the shuddering militant of “Old Complaints Revisited” and in the weary flâneurs of “Unguided Tour,” who sigh along to anthems because they haven’t forgotten the words. Sontag’s essay concludes with a striking interpretation of Benjamin’s essay on the Viennese critic Karl Kraus which serves as a précis of her own political fate:

Benjamin asks rhetorically: Does Kraus stand on the frontier of a new age? “Alas, by no means. For he stands on the threshold of the Last Judgment.” Benjamin is thinking of himself. At the Last Judgment, the Last Intellectual—that Saturnine hero of modern culture, with his ruins, his defiant visions, his reveries, his unquenchable gloom, his downcast eyes—will explain that he took many “positions” and defended the life of the mind to the end, as righteously and inhumanly as he could.

The essay is from 1978, the same year as “I, etcetera.” That is to say, three years after the official Vietcong victory, which prompted Sontag’s exhausted ambivalence. In Benjamin’s intellectual style, or her rather idiosyncratic understanding of it, she had found a trapdoor in the roaring malevolence of history, the chance to be blistering but vulnerable—the chance, that is, to dissent differently.

Four years later, speaking at Town Hall, in Manhattan, Sontag condemned Communism as “Fascism with a human face,” and—on a stage she shared with E. L. Doctorow, Allen Ginsberg, Pete Seeger, and Gore Vidal—declared that “people on the left have willingly or unwillingly told a lot of lies.” The promises of the sixties, for her, had curdled. Although Sontag, like Benjamin, was never reconciled to the cruelties of capitalist society, she felt betrayed by its looming alternative.

She couldn't possibly resign herself to an uncommitted aestheticism. But she tried. Sontag had told Kakutani in 1980 that political disengagement might prompt the culture to produce good, and not simply urgent, art: "We now have a situation where people are denied the hectic consolations of being part of movements." Sontag claimed to cherish this new loneliness, since "in the end the life of a writer is very solitary."

The statement is unlike her and was promptly forgotten. But you can hear in it the longing for something beyond the saturnine luminosity of Benjamin and the saintly self-martyrdom of Weil. A playfulness, perhaps—or, at least, a lightness of touch. "Later Essays" contains two pieces on Roland Barthes. He traipsed through postwar intellectual vogues—structuralism, semiology—and revelled, finally, in his own trilling peculiarities, an unrepentant aesthete. "He lacks anything like Walter Benjamin's tragic awareness that every work of civilization is also a work of barbarism," Sontag wrote in 1982, at a period in her life when she was becalmed between causes. Barthes, whom she had known, was for her a chuckling intellectual counterweight to her own erudite woe. This was a man "not tormented by the catastrophes of modernity or tempted by its revolutionary illusions," who "refers to the present literary era as 'a moment of gentle apocalypse.'" Such gentleness and humor and freedom from torment: these were traits she could admire but never quite claim.

A "IDS and Its Metaphors," Sontag's 1989 book and her next after "Under the Sign of Saturn," announced her return, if not to militancy, then to advocacy. "The AIDS epidemic serves as an ideal projection for First World political paranoia," she reported with alarm. The book is a bit pat, the arguments often self-evident—but it shoved Sontag back into the arena of political contest, her precious aloneness having been crumbled by collective suffering. The world had again been shattered, this time by a syndrome that was tearing through sub-Saharan Africa and the homosexual demimonde—that is, through populations already damaged by negligence or singled out for contempt by the same forces of reaction that Sontag had charged at twenty years before.

She recognized this. She was struck by the phrasing employed by the foreign minister of apartheid South Africa: "The terrorists are now coming to us with a weapon more terrible than Marxism: AIDS." And she was appalled that the reactionaries in her own country—Pat Buchanan, Jerry Falwell, Norman Podhoretz—derived a cackling

vindication from “pursuing one of the main activities of the so-called neoconservatives, the Kulturkampf against all that is called, for short (and inaccurately), the 1960s,” as they regarded AIDS as a punishment for the freedoms won by a rebellious age. The most gratifying insights of “AIDS and Its Metaphors” spring from this revelation of historical continuity, a sense that the old alliances, on behalf of the exploited and the despised, could be defrosted by political emergency.

Which is perhaps why the story in “Debriefing” that makes AIDS its explicit subject, “The Way We Live Now,” is also the strongest. Published in this magazine in 1986, it grasps the vastness and urgency of the crisis while noting its infinitesimal effects on the lives it disrupts. Devastating triviality and muddled sentiment scuttle through an account of a dying man and his friends. The man is never named:

And among those who came or checked in by phone every day, the inner circle as it were, those who were getting more points, there was still a further competition, which was what was getting on Betsy’s nerves, she confessed to Jan; there’s always that vulgar jockeying for position around the bedside of the gravely ill, and though we all feel suffused with virtue at our loyalty to him (speak for yourself, said Jan), to the extent that we’re carving time out of every day, or almost every day, though some of us are dropping out, as Xavier pointed out, aren’t

we getting at least as much out of
this as he is.

That “he” is stretched among the rattling psyches of Betsy, Jan, Quentin, Tanya, Paolo, Xavier. The story’s sentences are often like the one above—long, recursive, pocked by little objections and ricocheting between conflicting accounts. The single, powerful will—that reservoir of beautiful seriousness—has evaporated. Here, then, is a stifled kind of suffering, revealed in its power to inspire compassion and vanity and dread. “People are storing their own blood, for future use,” Sontag remarks in “AIDS and Its Metaphors.” The old model of altruism—donating blood anonymously—had been undermined by the epidemic. “Self-interest now receives an added boost as simple medical prudence.” So there’s a marvellous smallness to “The Way We Live Now.” What seems like love for the weakened, nameless protagonist turns into cynicism and selfishness. Perhaps, she suggests, that selfishness is built into this particular crisis seizing these particular people in their particular era—an era that wallows in the aftermath of dashed collective hope. This is an annihilating, spiritual fatigue.

And it grips Julia, a mordant, troubled woman, from the title story of “Debriefing.” Sontag’s style here is drifting and elegant, bearing a glimmering likeness to the work of her friend Elizabeth Hardwick. (She used to speak of putting “more Lizzie” in her prose.) Julia thrashes, moans, acts out, seems to dissolve into and finally reject the world. She throws herself at mysticism, withdraws from reason, and yet manages, still, to make people love her. Among those people is the narrator: the woman watching, feeling, trying to reason and haggle and intervene with Julia, trying to pay effortful, serious attention. The effort fails but is not, perhaps, useless. As the narrator admits near the story’s end, “I want to save my soul, that timid wind.”

“I was not trying to lead anyone into the Promised Land except myself,” Sontag wrote in 1966, sizing up the fiercer winds that gust through “Against Interpretation.” It has become a critical cliché to smirk at her dramatic volte-faces. In “Thirty Years Later,” written in 1995 as the preface to a Spanish edition of that book, she harrumphs at what remained of the sixties—its insolence, its impotent fury, its yen for levelling hierarchies—and laments what didn’t: the bravery, the élan that had driven her to espouse an “erotics of art” or to herald destruction as a creative

impulse. She regrets her failure to grasp “that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large” even as she pines for that decade’s buoyancy and dauntless spirit.

“How one wishes,” she writes, “some of its boldness, its optimism, its disdain for commerce had survived.” The words tug at a thread that shoots through “Later Essays.” Sontag went to Bosnia in 1993, outraged that genocide prompted such a sluggish response from the West, which could, in her opinion, have swiftly halted the slaughter with a well-placed military campaign. By going to Vietnam in 1968, she had lodged her virulent protest against American bombs. In the Sarajevo of 1993, she wondered where they were.

She wondered the same about the intelligentsia. “How many times,” Sontag fumed in that questionnaire from 1997, “has one heard in the last decades that intellectuals are obsolete, or that so-and-so is ‘the last intellectual?’” The line appears halfway through “Later Essays” and trumpets an irony that hums through the preceding pages. Four years earlier, she’d directed Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” in a harrowed Sarajevo. The world’s crises and allurements still transfixed her, and it remained the task of the intellectual to be sharply attentive and heroically stimulated.

“What has followed in the wake of 1989 and the suicide of the Soviet empire,” she wrote in an essay on the response of her peers to the Bosnian genocide, “is the final victory of capitalism, and of the ideology of consumerism, which entails the discrediting of ‘the political’ as such.” No triumphalism, then, about the End of History. If the political was hollowed, art was trivialized and collective life debased. All the valor and drama seemed to her to have vanished from the slack-jawed, victorious West. There was no ardor or ethics or conflict—and therefore no style, no virtue, no taste. What was lacking, in a word, was seriousness. ♦

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Tobi Haslett has contributed writing to n+1, Artforum, and Bookforum. [Read more »](#)

Video



Greta Gerwig in "Yeast"

Richard Brody on Greta Gerwig's performance in Mary Bronstein's "Yeast," from 2008.

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