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# Susan Sontag and the Practice of Modernism

*Sohnya Sayres*

Most of Sontag's fictional characters are neither heroes nor antiheroes as we have come to understand these figures. They lack the appeal of having mirrored our condition, satirically or otherwise. They live too separately; they are too much governed by dreams. In a sense, her fiction itself displays what the characters suffer from—excessive control: enigmas tend to reverberate interiorly. Dilemmas and glimpses of the other, nonself-referential world are replaced too often by closed possibilities and imposed wisdoms. Into these hermetically sealed lives come these intrusions, these truncated, pithy, antithetical statements seemingly in the mouths of her characters yet distinctly like Sontag in her other aspects. They are one of her most recognizable devices.

In her essays, she includes so many of these kinds of statements that the logic of her arguments jigsaws. One comes to understand that sharpness and objection matter more than development and substantiation. She cannot be much of a theorist then, some complain. Her interest in the individual work is too slight. Her statements have a melodramatic cast, her thoughts are merely compiled in that moralizing, French epigrammatic way. Then too, occasionally, in the midst of her “reason-dictates” tone, she tosses hand grenades.

How striking is the difference between her voice in her first volume of essays and Trilling's graceful, methodological circumventions of virtually the same years—in *Beyond Culture* (1965). What Sontag has to say is held in tension, the terms of her questions are more directed, as if she were prompted by a determination to enter the arena, during that lull in the critical controversies, readier to fight. She writes as if she is taking up a gauntlet, however gingerly it had been laid down before her.

That was a time when criticism was smothering modernism in its welcome, a welcome so reasonable that Trilling could write in “The Fate of Pleasure” (1963): “The energy, the consciousness, and the wit of modern literature derive from its violence against the specious good. We instinctively resent questions which suggest that there is fault to be found with the one

saving force in our moral situation—that extruded ‘high’ segment of our general culture which, with its exigent, violently subversive spirituality, has the power of arming us against, and setting us apart from, all in the general culture that we hate and fear” (BC 70).

Obscured in Trilling’s impenetrable “we” lies a challenge: “whether the perverse and morbid idealism of modern literature is not to be thought of as being precisely political, whether it does not express a demand which in its own way is rational and positive and which may be taken into account by a rational and positive politics” (73). What Trilling means by this is a general permission, given in other times to heroes, saints, martyrs, and in these times to artists, to lead exemplary subversive lives or to create exemplary subversive works.

Sontag recently told an interviewer that she remembers being moved by Trilling’s essay. While that remark is an off-handed hint only to the origins of her own search for a method, her essays are full of queries into the exemplariness of this age’s spiritual project, full of discussions with herself about what this politics might be like. She is spying into tenets of modernism as if it were a practice, as if it could be put to the test of a politics. What’s more, Sontag had just published a novel in which she examines that inheritance of the “perverse and morbid” in literature, especially as it might have been reinterpreted by the younger writers in France in the 1950s from the generation that had preceded them. When Trilling makes his call for “a novelist we do not yet have but must surely have one day, who will take into serious and comic account the actualities of the spiritual life of our time” (71), she had just finished being that kind of novelist. In response to Trilling’s thought that the “life of competition for spiritual status is not without its own peculiar sordidness and absurdity,” she could have pointed to the whole character of her protagonist and episode after episode in his story.

Sontag had acceded to a time in America’s critical life when the residues of Left puritanism were blowing away, when the hard work to drum out the 1930s broad realist aesthetic (of sentiment, type, and brotherhood of victims and the folk) was finished. What was still being done were efforts to accommodate that “extruded ‘high’” art into American ideals. That became Sontag’s stepping-off place, almost certain as she was from the beginning that this was an aesthetic that forbade accommodation. Trilling, on his side, could end his essay with the reassurances that “before we conclude that the tendencies in our literature which we have remarked on are nothing but perverse

and morbid, let us recall that although Freud did indeed say that ‘the aim of all life is death,’ the course of his argument leads him to the statement that ‘the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion,’ only through the complex fullness of its appropriate life” (76).

For Sontag, the impact of those lines might have come too close to the other forms of pious fellow-traveling to which Americans are all too prone. What was this complex fullness of a life in such extreme negation? Sontag would write with a sure and quick defense for artworks that shared next to nothing with this imperious aesthetic, such as Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* or *Camp*, grateful, as she says, for the release they offered. But that question kept returning to her, sending her to Europe to become a critic of all manner of Europe’s coming to grips with its recent past. She would skirt the revivals of Left Hegelianism, Left Freudianism, Left Nietzscheanism, Left existentialism and Left structuralism, listening and thinking about them, but not captured. What captures her is the attempt to “name the contours of the sensibility” Trilling felt came after pleasure as a motive in art and life.

The following is a discussion of the terms of her discourse. I have emphasized features that filtered out over time and give some thoughts to their individual troubles. This is not offered as an anatomy of a system—Sontag has avoided systems—rather as spotlights on certain repeated elements that lead her through her questions, while revealing her instincts, and that begin to have a dialogue one with the other. These form part of her practice, for want of a better word, as a writer and critic.

### 1. Epigrammatical Mode

Sontag’s writing is epigrammatical, though this is no special observation about her unless one keeps in mind that the epigram, unlike its close cousins the aphorism and the apothegm, includes a sense of inversion. The contradictory inspires a writer given to writing in epigrams, as a mode of thought in itself. The epigram rests on its turn of thought away from sense, as in C. L. Kline’s “the sacred duty of lawlessness.” The epigram may be sage and witty but it rarely assumes the burden, in good faith, of addressing the principle of the thing it observes—that is the aphorism’s function. Mouthed often, epigrams instead profess, as one character in Sontag’s fiction explains, a “line of gnomic crap.”

The epigrammatical mode can be recognized, overall, by

the penchant of the writer to make these quizzical statements as little or as large as his or her subject warrants (the set piece for the whole plot, perhaps) and then confound them. The point of the statement seems to be its pointedness, the encapsulation of what is experienced as a paradox—the interminable way in which meanings turn in on themselves, values reverse, and the only worthy gestures are the disruptive ones. The modern epigrammatist writes wisdoms, but not for the sake of enlightenment. They are instead intended as didacticisms of the perverse—truths that hold true because of their power to evoke the negation of what seems. Or truths neatly conceived yet so bland they blow away under the force of the contrary evidence of the story. Combine the hyperreflexivity of modern writing with the later focus on the independence of writing, reading, and interpretation, and the effect is to move the writer towards a voiceless speech that comes from nowhere. In Sontag's fiction, for example, even though the fate of her characters tends to belie what they offer as rationalizations, their voices carry their neutralized assertions out of the story in all headiness. That is, Sontag's characters are often shown to be quite mistaken about what they think they are doing, yet their formulations, suddenly in heaps, are not really to be disregarded. The vacuity of their experience is already presumed. They have explored nether values and the diminution of things, and in that realm their observations hold.

Yet Sontag aches for simpler truths, for aphoristic writing, perhaps the homiletic. Proverbs and folk sayings, everyone's favorite mottoes lie strewn about on placards in the charnel house of the last pages of *Death Kit*. The dead there have marched to their graves carrying their little judgments. The next reader finds these doomed, happier assurances in splinters.

As for irony—the epigrammatist works inside the strictures of an elaborated awareness of forms; to that extent she or he participates in the spirit of modernist gamesmanship. But the game takes on an edge when the language approaches the discursive wisdom of the epigram. Because the epigram is about reality and its negation, it may be the joke of jokes. Few writers find it a whimsical matter.

As for suffering—the epigram bears the writer away from suffering, being abstract and not dependent on things of the senses. In fact, a text composed of epigrams is tighter than one in which the eye passes over detail. One feels the precision with which the writer's intelligence (Sontag's most revered quality) confers on the world as a triumph for the speaker, against some lesser successes such as the connoisseur enjoys. "Intelligence"

finds these other modes a little lugubrious, a little obsequious, a little rhetorical.

This mode attracts the philosophical writer strongly given to thoughts about the Enlightenment's demise, who, nonetheless, takes no delight in the irrational, rather discounts metaphorical vehicles, and distrusts nothing as much as the springs of feeling. The thrilling possibilities of living in media-vision, a melee of fired perceptions, which so excites some recent writers, barely touches the epigrammatist. Sometimes, she may feel left out of the party, and tries to get into the swing of things, high on analytical wit. But she dances in weighted shoes.

## 2. On Silences

I have emphasized the efficacy of the mode of writing in epigrams, when of course epigrams give pleasure. They let the space around them grow rich, like the grass around tombstones, on what is buried. To the very extent they are pointed, precise, they outline the silence of what they do not speak. The pleasure is in the poise won. All around the silences reverberate anew. This is the kind of pleasure that entices the writer who sits reflecting before a commitment or a journey. Afterward the experience may want telling for its own sake. So she stops in unfinished propositions, readying herself against surprises, content to explore some of the contradictions before meeting them. She means to undermine the fallible, or to pay homage to mortality before disappearing beneath.

This mode fits Sontag's purpose well, for example, in her short story "Project for a Trip to China." We are invited to sit with Sontag as she considers what it means to her to go to China after so many years thinking about it as the place of her father's death and of herself as a political figure. She works downward just as she tells about how, when she was ten years old (her father had died a few years before):

. . . I dug a hole in the back yard. I stopped when it got to be six feet by six feet by six feet. "What are you trying to do?" said the maid. "Dig all the way to China?"

No. I just wanted a place to sit in. . . . The ivory and quartz elephants had been auctioned.

- my refuge
- my cell
- my study
- my grave. (*I*, e 8)

In this story Sontag creates that epigrammatical feel—that uncertainty structured into the assertions—by the interlocking of thought and objects rather than by letting the statement brush up against its foil. What she evokes is a latticework of spaces in which she can place the accounts of what she will see. In this sparseness, we do find an Orient of the heart, a porcelain beauty, a world dignified by silences. She prefers not to write about what is consecrated by history. In this hesitation, we recognize a tribute to enormity.

The end story in *I, etcetera*, “Unguided Tour” (made into a film by Sontag), pulls her themes of repetitions, pain, language, and literature along on another journey. The woman speaker confesses to her weariness with travel, to the predictability of thought and feeling. She knows before she begins, “all the possibilities of travel,” “all the words I am going to utter again.” Wherever she travels, “it’s to say goodbye.” Yet she continues to wander insatiably; some wound compels her. And only the wound is sufficient to give “lyricism” to the going which words would otherwise make redundant.

Silence restrains that self, protects it from contact, from being measured by life. This aspect of the “aesthetics of silence” goes unexamined in Sontag’s longish study. There is hardly any mention of a personal or historical correlative to the artist’s use of silence, as if it were so ubiquitous a choice in the twentieth century, the century itself has borne it.

What Sontag intends for us to understand, though I always suspect she is thinking of the European epoch after the war, is that sensibility which had been nurtured by Gide, Artaud, Genet—composite figures in her fiction—and which came up in the silences of Blanchot or Duras. They walked about as emotional skeletons, these postwar survivors. If they chose life it was from some incomprehensible, innate desire, of the kind Frau Anders displays in Sontag’s *The Benefactor*.

After the war the cruelty in themselves damned them to equations: “I am like them,” writes Duras in *The Lover*. “Collaborators, the Fernandezes were. And I, two years after the war, I was a member of the French Communist Party. The parallel is complete and absolute. The two things are the same, the same pity, the same call for help, the same lack of judgment, the same superstition if you like, that consists in believing in a political solution to a personal problem.” Survivors by accident, they link themselves to survivors by cowardice and betrayal, and conclude: “It’s in the silence that the war is still here.” Toward the cool, distant silences, or above the feverish ones,

their language strikes poses. It is that kind of voice which plagues Sontag, so close in tone and purpose to Blanchot's narrator in *Death Sentence* (1948): "The unfortunate thing is that after having waited for so many years, during which silence, immobility, and patience carried to the point of inertia did not for one single day stop deceiving me, I had to open my eyes all at once and allow myself to be tempted by a splendid thought, which I am trying in vain to bring to its knees. Perhaps these precautions will not be precautions" (30).

Lately Sontag is more prone to wandering in the halls of old cathedrals via their paintings, musing on the melancholy of the body as it is transformed by paint and camera. Even so, her language strains for the epigrammatical effect embedded in the silences of those experiences.

### 3. Spirit of Negation

One cannot be a modern epigrammatist without the spirit of negation running through one's head. The "no" advanced the project of the Enlightenment in its strike at authority; the "no" sends one's defiance out against destiny. The "no" outlines the self from all that would incorporate it. The "no" is the movable force of the dialectic, and as such it thus affirms what it negates. Negation's spirit is vigorous, astute, independent. It does not, however, lighten one's way. It sees the world in terms of powerful, weighty oppositions. In the sway of that spirit one is apt to give oneself moral dignity, so strong is the sense that what one is battling against is the necessary enemy.

In 1967, Sontag writes in "The Aesthetics of Silence" that the modern artist is "committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate." From the comfort of that widely held assumption, Sontag can enter the silence that beckons her with a brisk, objective mind. Silence can then exist "as a *decision*—in the exemplary suicide of the artist"; and it can also exist "as a *punishment*—self-punishment, in the exemplary madness of artists" (AI 9). She continues to feel along the walls for the limits of the artistic uses of silence, "boundary notions," not to be understood without the dialectic.

The dialectic calls up the "leading terms of a particular spiritual and cultural rhetoric" (AI 11). From the earliest part of this century, the dialectic of negation of contemporary values upheld the widest promise of experiencing a whole set of new relations. In art, negation was that tenet of modernism which



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called upon creation at the moment of destruction of older artistic forms. In the realm of the spirit, for the sake of the autonomy of the spirit, negation was to be exercised in all spheres. In Sontag's carefully retired language of "that particular rhetoric," one can hear that she senses, faintly concurs in the idea, that by the middle of the century that credo was slipping away.

Curiously, when one considers how she was identified with 1960s radicalism, her phrase was deaf to or cynical about the reenlistment of the ethos of negation in the political upswing of those times. The Frankfurt School had taught that negative dialectics had the power to break through those dementing forces of modern life—its monolithic structures, its paradoxical tolerances, the loony ways it fed consumerism and anesthetized with media. Perhaps Sontag sensed that despite its apocalyptic moods, the age's allegiance to negation was thin. There were too many benefits in living in a very rich, compulsively expansive society. Or as Sontag puts it: "in the post-political, electronically connected cosmopolis in which all serious modern artists have taken out premature citizenship. . ." (AI 34). The age's feeling for negation, at least as evidenced in its art, was growing more attenuated and mannered. In her words, the aesthetics of negation was living off of myths.

"In my opinion," she writes, "the myths of silence and emptiness are about as nourishing and viable as might be devised in an 'unwholesome' time—which is, of necessity, a time in which 'unwholesome' psychic states furnish the energies for most superior work in the arts. Yet one can't deny the pathos of these myths" (AI 11).

#### 4. Pathos of Heroes

That "pathos" cues Sontag's readers that an iconic evaluation is going on. Her moderns possess pathos, as some gift they have for endurance. Pathos keeps futility at bay, when it fixes on that subject with all of its attention. Then the two emotions lock in a kind of tug-of-war. This is the struggle of tragic heroes, and it is tragedy that brightens the star of pathos in the pantheon of sentiments. In any other sense of the word, we tend to be less sure of its virtues.

Sontag has spoken of the pathos of children, by which she invokes our more commonplace appreciation of their fragility and their neediness. A touch of these qualities can be felt in

that intimate and bonded way of hers of addressing the hauteur of the modernist aesthetic. But only a touch—the hopefulness of the childhood of an aesthetic. Mostly, it is her modern’s steadfastness in suffering that raises them to heroic stature. She admires the inexorability of their ideals, which drive them step by step to self-dissolve, or should they be heroes of the mind, their inexorable pursuit of self-confrontation. They have claims to some of tragedy’s merits, if only in their pathos. She would be the first to acknowledge that they would not themselves believe that they are worthy of tragedy’s impulses or even believe in its forms.

This pathos is the opposite of the quality of voice and approach to ideas the young Sontag liked to make, that is, those epigrammatical incursions. To steal a phrase from Sontag’s essay on Sartre, where she describes his solution “to his disgust,” the epigrammatical mode is “impertinent” (*AI* 98). Only later, into the 1970s, does the other side of her yearn toward the fullness of pathos.

By then, she has had more time to wrestle with several sides of herself and more time to test the climate in which her respectful, ambivalent looking back at the ethos of modernism is being received. Our sympathy with the pathos of heroes includes the luxury of afterthought. Their stories tend to be conclusive. The pathos we carry away becomes a lovely haze in which we recall the world of their struggles, a far slighter thing than if we thought we were subject to the same purposes. Sontag, having directed her critical energies to the new temperament, had to sense what double or triple ironic release survived in her italicized references to the “heroic age” of modernism and the “pathos” of its myths. Or rather, her statements are an attempt at a release, because to her all serious art, such as the impassioned minimalism of that period, called forth and relied upon these modernist “unwholesome” tenets.

## 5. Ethics

There is much at stake in these clashes of formal temperaments, that is, between what might be called the classical or “heroic” modernism and its later variety, the literature and arts of the ’40s and ’50s (and, arguably, modernism’s rollover into the postmodernism of the late 1960s and on). Two kinds of nourishments of consciousness are at stake, and thus, for Sontag, two kinds of ethical groundings.

As Maire Jaanus Kurrik formulates the matter, classical (modern) novels *negate*, modernist (or, in my terms, late modernist) novels *delete*. Admittedly, this is an oversimplification, a conceit. However, by taking a sight along this single line of inquiry, how negation metamorphoses, Kurrik can say things like this: later modernist novels make us uncomfortable not for what the books attack, but for what they override. The old humanist complaints against modernism—that modernism is nihilistic, tradition-destroying, the lamentable outcome of the excesses of Romantic mystification—can be countered with the argument that modernists say no to the power of God, destiny, authority, because the power of these things is mighty. The newer novelists are far less ambivalent; seemingly they can give up, erase, elide in a dispersed totality. The feel of deletion as it acts, then, is one of lessening, while the feel of negation is making something serious, complex, noble, and ignoble.

One of the problems with deletion, as Kurrik writes, is that while “it may bypass the corruption of our yesses and noes” (236), “its own violence displaces the violence of negation” (232). It is left with a state of “nolition”—an inability to wish or want anything. Negativity turns to negativism, and from there a person descends to a deracinated, dematerialized, “gutted,” and “drained” state.

Sontag’s characters in her fiction play these scenarios out, literally perform these operations on themselves. Hippolyte sets out to “delete” himself; Diddy to die while his stomach is being pumped. Their stories are exercises in the farcical underside of pathos of modernism’s myths. They are meant to be “despised”: that is, they are meant to be analyzed with wonder and indignation, sympathy and revulsion, in a paradigmatically ambivalent fashion. They are antithetical portraits of a sensibility towards which Sontag has tried to establish a position that neither judges nor interprets.

But Sontag is motivated by a larger set of values. The ethics of negation can lift the spirit to the mountaintop of mystical oneness; here the ethical secularist in Sontag is wary. The ethos of nolition of the new novel, on the other hand, cannot be abided with either, not directly, not by a moralist. It challenges Sontag to investigate Nietzsche’s thought that art is a “complex kind of willing” set alongside this world, a way of nourishing through its graces our capacity for willing. We are fed by the artist’s autonomous spirit; we are provoked to will. But if that spirit claims no autonomy, if it likens the world to a rush of reception—then the challenge moves to the reader, to that artist inside the critic. It forces her to save the seriousness of the modernist

project by herself working through it, until she has “exhausted it,” silenced it imaginatively, or in that cryptic word of hers, “disburdened” herself of it. In Sontag’s practice, modernism’s turn towards deletion begins to dress itself in the vestments of an allegorical struggle.

## 6. The Authentic Moral Spirit

If all this battling with the paradoxes of deletion only mires one more deeply in the paradoxical, it has to be thus. Paradox is a way of construing how it is to live in a time dominated by metacritical concerns, a time, as Sontag describes, that patronizes itself infinitely. One has to learn to live with that sense of being watched too closely, at every level too aware of historical indebtedness, structural imperatives or deceptive motives about one’s own behavior and ideas. Looking back on the modernist flight from bad faith (the failed, incomplete project of negation) into nothingness, one realizes that the moment of pure freedom and creativity—the “present” of modernism—can never be achieved. One is hopelessly bound by the self thinking about the self striving for authentic life. One longs to be disburdened.

The authentic moral spirit, however, does not compromise with the world, and disburdenment can seem a compromise. So a kind of deal is struck: specifically, in the modernist scheme, one achieves authenticity by negating the authorities and conventions generating from one’s own work. The self that is then transcended is not suspected of being the originator of sin, error, pollution, or arrogance (the mystic’s demons); rather it is seen as an agent imposing false constraints. This self is both imperious and alienated from its own liberation. It can be won back to itself only by a downward slide to the very edge of existence.

Trilling finds in this ideal something he dislikes. He writes in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1970)—his way of retreating from that call for a positive politics of 1963—that it is indicative of our times that our intellectuals advocate the overcoming of alienation by completing it.<sup>1</sup> What bothers Trilling, what he distrusts in all that negating business of the rule of authenticity, is that the advocacy of completing alienation “involves no actual credence.” To which argument, Sontag, in effect, replies: no actual credence, to be sure, for no artist or intellectual can completely silence his or her own speech, adopt madness over sanity, destroy the creation upon which he or she experiences being an artist or intellectual without ceasing to be one. Short of that final, actual negation—utter silence, complete madness,

successful suicide—there is that promise of acting out, and thereby learning from, the paradoxes of one's own positions.

Perhaps another explanation for the modernist phenomenon Trilling dislikes so much—the advocacy of overcoming alienation by completing it—is that advocacy plays the brave stance of negation while fulfilling a more primitive desire: self-consistency. In a state of total alienation a person finds a certainty of his or her own making. The insane person wills chaos and thereby escapes the disorientation of the sane person who merely suffers it. So does the artist of the aesthetic of silence. The sad realization comes upon the modernist, though (perhaps then covering them with the honor of pathos), that in the self-made world of the alienated there can be a sense of being justified, but there is no justice; of being truthful to oneself, but of sharing no truth. There can only be an affirmation of a negative state in which we find others who are lost.

In Sontag's fiction and in a strain of her criticism—on Artaud, Cioran, Benjamin, for example—there is an advocacy (sharply curtailed, argued with) for the allegorized world in which the artist pursues the negative state in order to know self-completion. And she is quick to point out that that state is morbid, like death, if not a death itself. What surprises her is her own indelible “fascination with morbidity.” Her frequent references to the need to “disburden” the self, to call modern thinking “disembowelment”—seemingly she regrets these capitulations to the reigning ideal. The political side of Sontag, the side that cares for moral action, repudiates both this apocalyptic sense of negation and its encroachment on well-being. She is always buttressing the citadels of modernism to keep them from leaking into the present, spilling out their creeds into our lives.

## 7. Politics

History, though, has to offer at least a vision of that future where solitude is overcome and action is meaningful in order for it to sustain hope. Mailer thought he saw such a vision in the sea of demonstrators marching to the Pentagon. In the 1960s there was a near devotional enthusiasm for pageantry, as if making a scene could reinforce the dream that progressive forces were alive. Sontag's politics had little interest in such events; she was more interested in having vision reflect on the categorical struggles within herself. Perhaps this is the one reason

why *Trip to Hanoi* appeared to some as a romance. North Vietnam in the midst of its war with America provided a place to witness the instance of the opposite, a place making an “ethical fairytale.” It offered her the chance to compare the spirit of positive action against the passivity of Western intellectualism, with that particular Western concern for individual style. In North Vietnam Sontag thought she found a unity of commitment, a simplicity of purposes and values. To her it was a place of unashamed moralism and nonironical values. It was a place, moreover, where there was no avant-garde. She believed North Vietnam challenged the premise she had helped establish—that the power of art was located in its power to negate; North Vietnam refuted her prescription for intelligence. There, excessive self-consciousness did not even have an audience.

That she writes of her impression of the North Vietnamese with nothing less than the full presence of her complicating, modernist consciousness should not arouse the reader’s cynicism. Sontag never intends to complete the transformation of herself into her negated self, since that transformation is an allegory. It suggests only that the self has to look to defeat its own material, intellectual, historical recalcitrance. Sontag’s work is an exploration of the desire to negate, of the will to do it, not of the extent. The extent always troubles her.

What she would rather have us contemplate are the styles of this radical willing. She addresses these various styles in her first two collections of essays. By the time she writes of photography in the mid-1970s, she has come around again to adopt the position of some of the Left-humanist critics before her. The modernist era had accomplished what she fears is a terrifying distortion of perception. Modernism, while negating itself as art, turned the world into art. It aestheticized life. Modernism had made antiform, disaster, horror as much subject for aesthetic pleasure as beauty; it forced pleasurable regard beyond all boundaries until it became a wholly inadequate response. Experience and imagination could both be treated as spectacle. All that was needed was a certain, very minimal, integrity of elements.

Readiness, style, demonstration, action: these were the critical terms for the 1960s; Sontag’s title *Styles of Radical Will* captures the essence of that preparedness, that nourishing of contemplation that provokes the will. Still, consciously or not, the paradox of modernist action is already built into the phrase: having a style of radical will stands for the ultimate expression of the aestheticization of life, just as it stands for a complete response to the conditions of alienation.

*Sontag never intends to complete the transformation of herself into her negated self, since that transformation is an allegory. It suggests only that the self has to look to defeat its own material, intellectual, historical recalcitrance.*

One can live with contradictions as long as a greater cause by which one justifies oneself remains irrefutable. It is only later, under the sense that something has gone wrong, that paradoxical intentions are examined for what they are. After the radical culture faded in influence, it was not difficult to point out that its impact was weakened by its emphasis on modes or styles of being. Sontag was caught up in the same kinds of corrections, not repudiations, as were many others. In fact, Sontag soon distrusted the politics of style (see her essay on Cuba, 1969) shortly after and perhaps even while she was writing about it. The arguments for such a politics come too close to paralleling arguments for modernist art. In practice, this politics took too much from the ideals of freedom, and had too much the sense of individual volition, or rather, it dematerialized its sense of opposition, was too trusting of and too dependent on notions of the will.

But it has to be said, that in reading Sontag's *Trip to Hanoi* and the later "Project for a Trip to China," one realizes that Sontag cannot give up the essential esteem she has for both trips as trips and both places as opposites to her sensibilities. Rather than her attitude being romantic, or pastoral, or Orientalist, her attitude reflects that tendency in her towards abstraction, a certain mechanical sense of negation, the very one that has been her target all along. She may "despise" her protagonists; she may be exasperated with the trajectory of modernist thinking—she spotted and roundly criticized this problem as early as her 1963 essay on Lévi-Strauss. She knows its power, nonetheless.

## 8. Melancholic Allegorist

In *Under the Sign of Saturn*, which is her sign as well as Walter Benjamin's (and by implication that of the others in this volume), melancholics seek to be contented with the ironies of mortality. But it seems that life is always outpacing them. Nervously, melancholics have a determination to sequester loss. They descend the path to the contemplation of death and vile-ness and there, at that base, they find they are thinking in allegories. Faithlessly, they have been given a vehicle of redemption. Benjamin writes:

Ultimately in the death signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. . . . And this is the essence

of the melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the ideal of redemption. (232–33)

Part of what Benjamin means by redemption is that which is gathered up into the idea, into a process which has its own essences but which at the same time bespeaks the totality. “That is its Platonic ‘redemption’” (46). The melancholic here, in the German baroque drama, awaits a transfiguration that would bring him or her back into the eddies of becoming an authentic idea, presumably a tragic hero, or perhaps even a lesser being who is about to experience the satisfaction of self-discovery. Otherwise, the melancholic’s “wisdom is subject to the nether world,” as a contemplator of dead things.

How strange that Sontag and others should take up as part of the idea of consciousness of our times this obscure art form, the German *Trauerspiel*, the emblem-ridden, allegorically coded ceremony of sorrow which the seventeenth century fetishized as melancholic contemplation. Perhaps some of that presumed affinity comes from the desire to write like Benjamin; another cause is that which Benjamin himself characterizes as the “fatal, pathological suggestibility” that is “characteristic of our age” (53). “Like expressionism,” he continues, “the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will. . . . To this should be added the desire for a vigorous style of language, which would make it seem equal to the violence of world-events” (54–55).

It is an art of epigones, given to exaggeration, the “spectacle of spiritual contradiction” and the antithetical; its common practice is to “pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unrelenting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of a stereotype for the process of intensification” (178). The melancholic hero of the allegories adopts the world in ruins as his or her natural place, a place beyond beauty and without revelation, where the “events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting” (179).

“To be exploited as muted cultural commentary does not exhaust the eloquence of ruins. As an allegory of personal as well as historical loss which cannot be repaired, they are an old figure in the aesthetic of melancholy,” Sontag writes in 1986 in her introduction to *Veruschka: Transfigurations*. “What char-



acterizes the aesthetic of melancholy is that there is no witness, only a single, unmoving protagonist—one who does not witness desolation but *is* desolation—and whose complete identification with the desolate scene precludes feeling (its exemplary forms: tears), whose gaze is unresponsive, withdrawn” (12). In Sontag’s rendering of the sensibility of our age, she begins to tire of finding “the politics of the perverse and the morbid” that Trilling had called for with a half-raised flag. Instead, she is beckoned by the melancholic allegorist. To her, late modernism passes into the shadows, becomes a shade of contemplation of the infernal; to her, the allegorical dimension of thinking sanctions the emptying out of colossal events and turns them into plays of the disembodied that await their and our “faithless leaps.” The principle, as she says in her essay on Cioran, is that one save oneself.

In the baroque world of the seventeenth century, emblems, mottoes, and allegorical narrative were used unmistakably to promote obeisance to the court, church, or some other ideal of incorporated glory. If allegory has returned as a favored explanation of our art and sensibility, it augurs this one felicity: allegory is inaccessible to ironic deflation. The nearly dogmatic commitment to self-translation—to Sontag, modernism’s gnostic complaint—in allegory is relieved of its ironic trivializing. Something is believed in allegory, something stands behind and supports the whole apparatus. There is no meaning immanent in the ruins. But the alienation that exposed rituals—our more common modern experience—turns to the pathos of admiring what is lost. What could that be now but the energy and confidence of heroic modernism, now sheltered by its monumentality in a landscape of horrors?

On those topics she likes, Sontag writes very slowly. In that pace comes the melancholic attachment which sets out to de-velop its reasons for empathy. From these dead objects and fallen virtues she discovers and forges a dramaturgy of relinquishment. Inside the writer of the “new” is the writer searching to name the contours of the modern sensibility in the already just past.

In Sontag’s first twenty-five years of writing, she is never far from this strange allegory of disburdenment. Her fiction is a tale told from these ending processes; in her essays she puts herself to the task: she exacts from herself the charge of exhausting the Westernizing, metacritical, self-patronizing consciousness that “digests” and “cannibalizes” itself in order to recover a longed for, lighter state. In describing Sontag’s choice, I have tried to take her advice and consider “that it is what it

is.” That the allegory of disburdenment has crystallized in her work, with its special, inner constitution and outward predilections, has given her work a center and personality. It has become her way of “soliciting self-knowledge” as Cary Nelson has phrased it, a way of doing criticism as a “zone of permission, a special site on which self-extinction can be desired and verbally pursued” (726).

### Coda

I have to remark upon how highly selective these eight points are. I have dug grooves into Sontag’s work in order to make tributaries flow into a river. I protest myself. This is a violation. Sontag deserves a wider, livelier appreciation. *Against Interpretation* and “The Aesthetics of Silence” are much quoted and taught. Principles from her “The Pornographic Imagination” are drawn upon virtually whenever the subject is discussed. *Trip to Hanoi* has been under continuous review since its publication in 1968, and *On Photography* (1977) has enjoyed a few attempts at “application” of its theories. *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), simply, has helped people, and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) most likely will too when the scientific evidence is more certain and the political climate less explosive around issues of responsibility. Its long view is grating on AIDS workers, while its sympathies seem a little late. Older essays such as “Notes on Camp” and “Fascinating Fascism” gave permission to a whole new class of intellectuals to look more deeply into popular culture. What she accomplished in keeping alive a debate, on Riefenstahl or Syberberg, not surprisingly, is still fought over. Equally, she set standards and made a lasting contribution to the culture of the United States in introducing European thinkers. It has been said, not so generously, that that has been her chief role. She is less well remembered for how she set out to correct our understanding of Lukács, Lévi-Strauss, Weil, Sartre, Camus, Barthes, Artaud, or for the way she emphasized the moral nature of the form—in disaster films, piety in the secular age, the novel, metatheater. This is a period where she is being more closely watched for her political fumbles, in her place under the spotlights as that kind (the older type) of intellectual who makes statements, takes on polemics, goes to enemy lands, and fights for artistic freedom.

Why then have I here stuck to the trying themes of negation and disburdenment in the face of all these separate, explicit, fulminating, and controversial accomplishments? Answer: to

advance the case Sontag herself likes to put forth about her work. She is to herself a complete artist, welding her essays and fiction and films into one aesthetic. She told an interviewer in May 1988, while in Lisbon at an international conference of writers, that she does not "write about things, period. Everything that I write is fiction even when I write an essay. When I write an essay it is a type of fiction." She starts, in the morning at her desk, with language, "and then I go on an adventure for the next sentence. I try to follow ideas of seriousness and good use in language" (Rattner A-31). She wishes to present herself thus, as a formalist and an artist. This essay takes her at her word, for the sake of what she is after.

### Notes

1. Trilling also quietly responds to Sontag's *Against Interpretation* in the essay "The Heroic, The Beautiful, the Authentic." She is mentioned in the text, and pointedly, in a footnote in which Trilling shows that his essay "The Fate of Pleasure" came first (171). By implication Sontag is linked to the likes of Sarraute's "relentlessly censorious tone [which] suggests the moral intensity we now direct upon the questions of authenticity" (101). She, like Gide, Lawrence, and Sartre himself has added to the "gabble"—those conventions, maxims, etc., of "anyone who undertakes to satisfy our modern demand for reminders of our fallen state and for reasons why we are to be ashamed of our lives" (105).

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